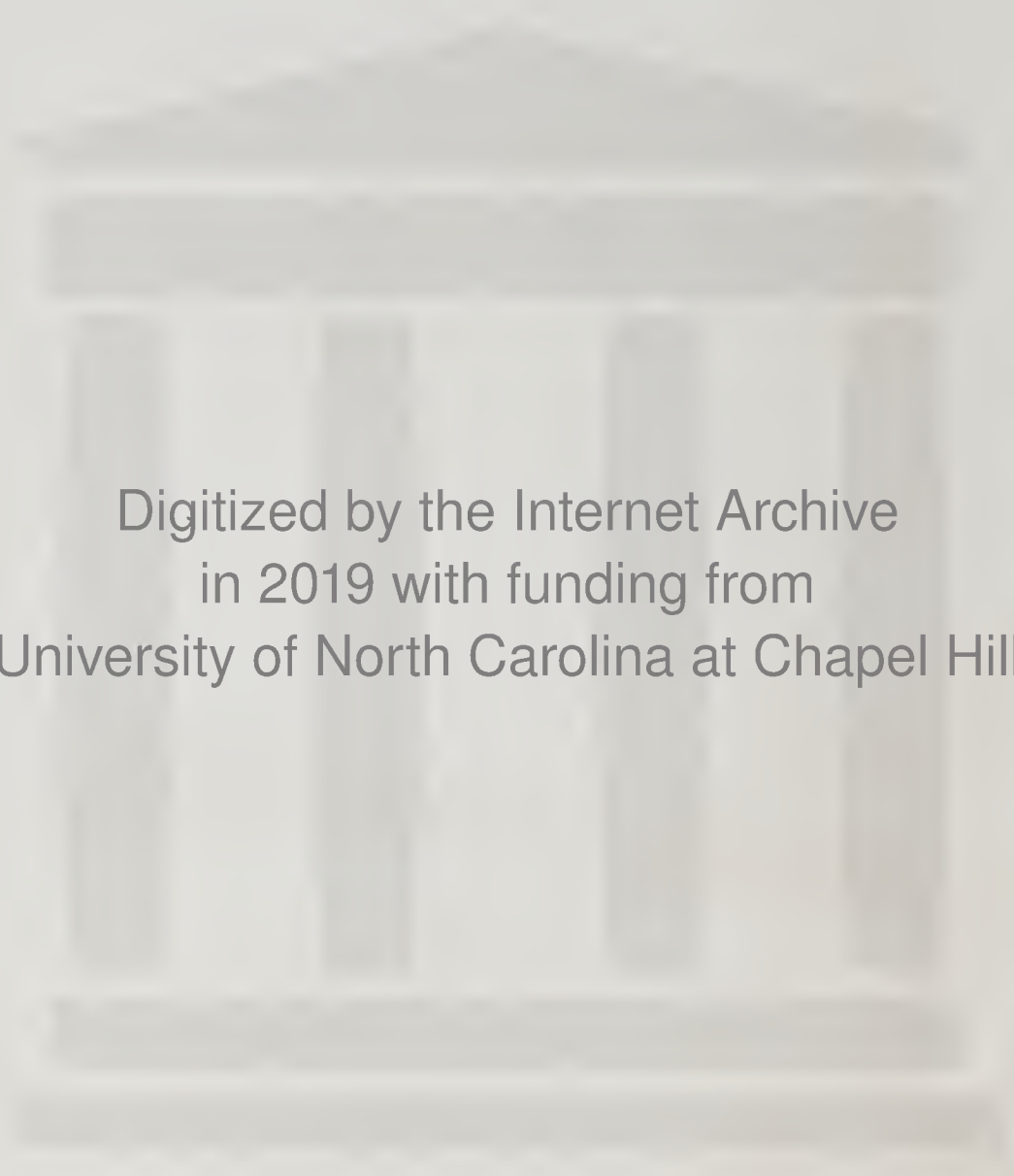


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THE GREEN PARROT

BERNARD CAPES





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# THE GREEN PARROT

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OUR LADY OF DARKNESS  
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ROMANCE OF LOHENGRIN  
A CASTLE IN SPAIN  
SECRET IN THE HILL  
A ROGUE'S TRAGEDY  
LOAVES AND FISHES  
THE GREAT SKENE MYSTERY



THE  
GREEN PARROT

BY BERNARD CAPES

LONDON  
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1908

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# THE GREEN PARROT

## CHAPTER I

MR. PERCEVAL ACTON, barrister-at-law, swept through a pair of swing-doors in the Law Courts, and hurried across Fleet Street on his way to the Temple opposite. The swing-doors, in boisterous approval of a character as time-serving and time-saving as their own, blew a windy kiss or two after him as he disappeared among the traffic.

The swing-doors themselves were modern, but in sheer up-to-dateness they were to Mr. Perceval Acton as velocipedes to a motor-car. If *they* represented the first democratic encroachments on Time's leisured prerogatives, *he* stood for its virtual obliteration. He was emphatically a product of his age, and his age was the age of universal push, of speed records and "linkings-up," of snap, snippets, and smartness.

In the present instance there was no particular call upon his nerves of motion ; he hurried, merely because it was his habitual instinct to gain in the general race. It was a creed of his type, well justified, perhaps, that the first comers got the first fruits, and, the age serving, he had consistently acted up to that creed. He had been early re-

cognised in his profession for an extremely pushing young man, with a constitutional insensibility to snubs.

The type, truth to confess, is not an all attractive one. It may embrace anything from a duke to a lion-comique. Perhaps the apotheosis of the actor, engendering a craze for shaven faces, may have had something to do with a certain vulgarity and lack of individuality which characterise it. There was really little in Acton to differentiate him from a thousand other examples of his kind. He had been a public school boy and a university man ; yet, barring his wig and gown, one would not necessarily have associated him with the caste to which he had a prescriptive title—not necessarily, nor necessarily otherwise. He was like the drawing of a gentleman, by one who was not, stepped straight out of an American magazine, where all men are shaven and equal. In appearance he was slim, of the average height, and neat figured, a trifle over-select in dress, a trifle, or more, under-select in speech. His features were good, even forcible in detail, with strongly-marked eyebrows, blue cheeks, and a contemptuous mouth ; yet their expression conveyed an indefinable suggestion of commonness, a scorn of delicacy for delicacy's sake, an arrogance of conceit in his own quality of successfulness. For he had been successful, and at thirty-five was both noted and prosperous. Above all living things he despised the clever poor man.

It was nearing the end of Trinity Sittings, and shafts of an August sun-down met and played over him as he passed, with his rapid, alert step, by



passage and quadrangle. Coming into Fountain Court, he had to shade his eyes with his hand, pausing a moment, to correct his passage by the basin with the little pipe of water jetting in it. Under his lifted palm his eyebrows looked very strong and black, and the line of his mouth took a depressed and rather mocking curve. Then he uttered a soft ejaculation, and stopped.

The figure of a man known to him stood by the fountain, its eyes bent upon the little restless water-spout, its attitude somehow suggestive of defeat and melancholy. Acton, dwelling a moment on a contemptuous thought, stepped up, and touched this loiterer on the shoulder.

“Wisdom!” said he, “hey? looking for inspiration, I suppose?”

The figure, with no appearance of shock or surprise, turned quietly about, and greeted its accoster with a smile. It was that of a tall lank man of about his own age, rather bent, it seemed, under the weight of shoulders heavy disproportionately with the slack lower limbs. Its chest was slightly contracted, as if from an habitual stooping over desks; but its arms were curiously long and powerful in suggestion, though at the moment they hung like useless appendages. The face was lean and square and hectic, its eyes blue and eager, its lips parted in a smile full of intelligence and humour. A short greying moustache emphasised the upper one. The clothes of the figure were, though well worn, the clothes of a gentleman, and included an orthodox silk hat and a light overcoat of a sober fawn colour. The tall man had that natural gift of appearing to

welcome any acquaintance with pleasure. There was a most sociable sweetness in his smile.

“This fountain was thought the very spring of it once upon a time,” said he. “But Ruth Pinches are quite out of date.”

Acton shrugged his shoulders—a barrister’s trick—into his gown.

“She was first-class business,” he said, “and that, I believe, is never out of date. I’d chuck my superiority, John Wisdom, if I were you, and try her again. It might pay.”

The other answered—irrelevantly, it seemed.

“I love my Dickens,” he said; “I grew up with him. I love and honour him. He remains in my heart of hearts the unapproachable king of all story-tellers.”

Acton stared a moment, and laughed.

“O, very well!” he said. “But where’s the offence?”

“Where?” answered the tall man. “You wouldn’t understand, of course. Or rather there’s no offence. It’s just the common voice. The public are the derivatives—not we.”

He checked himself, and laughed in his turn, bending over his stick.

“Look here, Acton,” he said; “I’m glad you’ve chanced on me. I was wanting a word of counsel from such as you. Are you on your way to your chambers? Let me come with you; and—and you might give me a glass of wine. I feel sort of chilled all through. May I come?”

The barrister conned the speaker curiously, but without favour. In his soul he heartily despised



the man—a romance writer, of what was called the New School, but, in spite of a “name,” and much *succès-d’estime*, a popular failure. He despised him because he was a failure; and, because he was a failure, he was inclined to think him a poor-spirited, even a rather pusillanimous creature. His interest in him as a potential celebrity was long quenched (the two were club acquaintances, no more). Yet, psychologically, there remained here the dregs of a character study.

“Certainly,” he said; “by all means. I can spare you a half-hour. Come.”

He led the way across the court and into his chambers, which were on the first floor. The room into which he ushered his guest was freshly pannelled in white, with the mouldings picked out in sky-blue and gold. The furniture was all carved oak, of the heaviest emporium style, and the chairs were upholstered in crimson plush. A modern picture or two, of the order that changes hands in Cheapside auction-rooms, hung on the walls. The general effect was of something between a *Café chantant* and a furniture-dealer’s showroom; but it all represented money.

Mr. Acton hung his wig on a block standing on the desk, and threw his gown over a chair. He became immediately a stereotype of the magazines, representing anything between a viscount and a dentist on the right side of middle age.

“What wine?” he said, turning to his visitor. “There’s port in the cellarette.”

“Port, certainly, thank you,” answered John Wisdom. “It has the right suggestion in a storm.”

He sat in a sort of loose exhaustion in a chair by the window. As he sipped his wine approvingly, he looked up.

“This is a very good brand, Acton,” he said. “You may trust me for a connoisseur. My father kept a great cellar.”

“Indeed,” said Acton, a little interested. “You come of well-to-do folk, do you ? ”

John Wisdom nodded.

“Once upon a time. There were disasters. An independent income of about two hundred a year is all that has descended to me.”

“Indeed ! ” said Acton again, in a further note of interest, and some wonder. “I didn’t know. I thought, upon my word, that you were about played out.”

“So I am.”

“But not—— ? ”

“O, dear me, no ! The income remains. I refer to my struggle with the public. Acton,” he said, leaning forward, “I know what you’re thinking, that, starting with an income of two hundred a year, *you*, by this time, would have made it two thousand.”

The barrister did not answer. The other drew himself back in his chair with a sigh.

“You would have,” he said. “It’s quite true. But authorship’s another matter.”

“Yet there’s evidence enough it *can* be made to pay.”

“O yes ! It can.”

“Putting aside natural qualifications, which are of secondary account, there are methods, I suppose



—interests to propitiate, powers to court—logs to roll, in fact. Certainly to fly deliberately in the face of received opinion isn't one method to be recommended ; nor is another to hold oneself aloof from useful connections ; nor is another all that damned silly stuff of form and style upon which you have persisted to your destruction. I always guessed how it would be. It didn't want much penetration. But, upon my life, I'm at a loss to know what you, holding such views, expected to get out of it all."

"What do you think ? "

"Reputation, I suppose. Well, I hope you're satisfied. You are known at the end—very well known, on the whole—as an author to be avoided."

He sat himself down on the table, and, crossing his legs, blew coolly on his finger nails.

"Wisdom," said he, "you mentioned my counsel just now. You can have it if you like."

"I should like."

"Chuck the whole thing, then. You're a failure. That's the brutal truth."

There followed a pause ; and then the other spoke :

"Supposing I am—supposing I recognise it—what's the logical end to such failure as mine ? "

Mr. Perceval Acton slipped from the table as quickly as he had mounted it, and taking a single rapid turn by the wall, went and looked out of the window. Never a word he spoke ; but his air, his atmosphere, some frightfulness of suggestion in the motion of his hand across his throat, said "Suicide" as plainly as his lips might have done.

It *was* the logical end to him, to whom failure was represented by as laggard, colourless an existence as ever falls upon a toper forced to abstain. If thrown out of the race himself, he would not have wished to live another hour.

He let the moral mature before he turned round ; and then, in the very act, uttered a little startled shriek. Two long nervous arms seized, lifted him, and held him up, back-flat against the wall, like a kicking puppy. In the midst of his surprise and anger, the recognition of an unexpected physical power in the creature he had so despised for its general invertebracy struck him for the moment quite aghast. Then fury came to his aid. He struggled violently, violently alive to the indignity of his situation. The arms pinned him relentlessly. He was as helpless and ridiculous as a beetle on its back. There was a look, too, in the eyes facing him. They and the mouth were momentarily tigerish.

"Are you sure it isn't murder?" said John Wisdom.

"What the devil are you fancying?" screamed Mr. Perceval Acton, suddenly rigid. "I said nothing."

With a loud sudden laugh, John Wisdom relaxed his hold, and let his captive drop to the floor. Mr. Perceval Acton found his feet and his temper at the same time.

"You infernal——" he began.

"Hold your tongue," said the other sharply. He still dared him with his eyes.

"So that's your miserable materialistic creed," he went on, rather breathed and panting a little.

“I can quite believe it. The world, and the opinions of the world, bound your philosophy. Not the ‘Captain of your Soul,’ Acton—where’s the inducement to command such a paltry little craft?—but the flunkey of circumstance. I’m a failure—yes, to be sure—and I know what that represents to you. But do you suppose I’m beaten because I’m unappreciated? I take pride in being an Englishman of the old sort, my son. My books won’t sell; neither the critics nor the public will have them. Very well; I shall waste no more time on an unresponsive market. But the world remains; the ‘running brooks’ remain; the stones preach as of old, and there’s a story in every breeze. If I mayn’t tell tales, I can listen to them. You suppose I wrote for reputation. It was in the bond. But what do you think the sensitive soul of the artist publishes for, runs the ruinous gauntlet of Philistinism, courts the suffrages of the unsympathetic, makes itself a motley to the view, and bares its inmost treasures to a thousand misinterpretations and insults? Why, for money, you monkey—for hard, glittering, potent cash. It must take the chances, like any other speculator, short of self-prostitution. That’s where we differ. You would have had me meet the demand instead of trying to create it. You would have done so yourself in a like case. We are leagues apart. I leave this court of public opinion without a stain on my character, and I’m not going to commit suicide. Thank you for the wine. Good-bye.”

“Mad,” said the ruffled barrister, viciously and quite loud, as the door closed on his visitor.



## CHAPTER II

THE author who called himself John Wisdom (he had borrowed the name, a rather rashly challenging one, perhaps, from an ancestor) had now been more or less prominently before the public for ten years. His first book had made quite what is called a "splash." It was a romance; and the vigour of the story, combined with a certain nervous originality revealed in the manner of its telling, had brought him a considerable measure of notice—encouraging, without doubt, but by no means all flattering. He had been quite prepared for that. It was the nature of the note of disapproval which astonished him, inasmuch as it sounded a warning, almost a threat, against the very quality for which he had expected most commendation.

The man was a story-teller by nature. He could scarcely remember the time before his fancy had begun to give itself play in a thousand directions. He had been an only child, and a solitary, the plaything and butt of spoiling but unsympathetic parents—facts which had encouraged him to create a world and people about him of his own. He had read early and greedily, and, by the time he was despatched to school, was already something of a connoisseur of style. That is to say, experience, and a practised habit of discrimination, had taught

him why certain stories "told," and why others did not. From criticising his own line of literature, he began to develop a wish to produce something in the same genre which should illustrate the right principles of composition as he had interpreted them. He wrote, in school and out of it, tales, verses, little experimental essays on a dozen familiar subjects—small and perishable matter, but just exhibiting, to their credit, a sense of form and selection. He was a local celebrity while the phase lasted; and then, in proper course, the airy stuff flew by, and the sterner problems of growth and manhood claimed him. But the foundations had remained, to rebuild upon by-and-by.

His parents had been well-to-do people, until once upon a day comparative ruin overtook them. Debility, mental atrophy, death followed in quick succession. At twenty-five years of age John Wisdom had found himself left an orphan with only a reasonable patrimony. Circumstances alone—somewhat tragic circumstances, operating upon an oddly Quixotic nature—presented this patrimony to him in an inadequate light. Otherwise he would have considered it sufficient, and more than sufficient for his needs.

He did not, in the first instance, adopt authorship wholly and solely out of love of it. The incitement to put his gifts to such account had come to him at a certain very crucial pass of his life. Totally untrained as he was to any business or profession, lacking in a signal degree the commercial head, he had jumped at this means, the only one which presented itself to him, to an amusingly ambitious end.

Less unworldly people might have shown him the folly of his aspirations. His principles in themselves were a completely fatal bar to their realization. But he was a man of considerable independence of character, and unwont to invite comment on his actions. The old faculty recurred to him. He decided that he would become an author in earnest, and coin his invention into money—quantities of it, if the conscious fertility in himself were any criterion of the fruits it would yield. Here, to be sure, he reflected happily, was really his natural vocation and delight and potential fortune in one.

He was by nature a story-lover and story-teller, and he would tell stories for profit, because then he could lose himself, while he beguiled the world, in the mazes of his own fancy. At the same time, to his fastidious sense of form, a story vulgarly told was a story spoilt. Much, everything essential, in fact, to the flair, the flavour of the thing depended upon the manner of its telling. He could quote a thousand tales lacking, in his opinion, that cunning quality of recountal to a dozen which possessed it. Therein lay to him the whole question of the art which exalted a rather petty faculty. It was to be compared to the acquired skill of the lapidary in giving form and brilliancy to natural gems. Of those, in the rough state, he felt pretty comfortably secure. His fairy godmother had gifted him with their unlaboured production. If they did not drop from his lips (for he was constitutionally reticent), they could be brought to them for abstraction almost at pleasure. His equipment, therefore, was



ready to hand. His business lay in preparing and polishing his jewels for the shops. He had been living for little more than a year in London when he brought out that first book of his which made the splash.

The result was what the Americans gracefully call an eye-opener. The novel told; the manner of its telling displeased.

John Wisdom was puzzled, and for the moment disappointed. He himself had considered the story only justified through its style. That, or the reverse, had been his opinion of all the stories he had ever read. What puzzled him still more was the number of authorities, great and little, on which he was asserted to have confusedly founded himself. He was certainly conscious in himself of literary predilections; but that any man of intellect and individuality could be thought capable of making himself the "dwarfish thief" to a "giant's robe" passed his comprehension. Rather he would do violence to his predilections, would he not, even to the extent, perhaps, of misrepresenting himself in his determination to escape their influence? Possibly there lay the crux of the matter. He had misled people by making a positive detour to avoid others in looking for himself. Henceforth he must go his own gait, unconcerned with nervous apprehensions of any sort. Success must follow upon the plain recognition of his individuality.

It was the crux in part, but not the whole, nor nearly the whole of it. Wisdom was by nature a shy man—silent and self-withdrawing, and from first to last beset by a constitutional difficulty in

expressing his thoughts clearly. It was the struggle to master this natural inability, and no labouring in other men's tracks, that made his style obscure. For obscure it was at first, there is no denying, and only finally clarified at the expense of infinite pains and self-discipline. He had no pig-headed conviction of his own infallibility. He was ready, and even anxious, like all true artists, to profit by sympathetic criticism ; and of that, in a certain degree, he never lacked. It was a misfortune only that he had alighted upon a time which clashed hopelessly with his own opinion of the true function of the novel. He found that serious criticism demanded of it a greatly didactic mission. It was not to be an imaginative, but an educational force. It was to be impressed, if it would live, into the social service of the State.

He did not hold that view himself. Story-telling, to his mind, was a distinct art, of which the novel should aim at being the highest expression. He would run over in his mind the immortals who had created and confirmed it as such, and in all the brilliant succession he could find not one who owed his fame to the preaching faculty. They had been one and all story-tellers and romancers in the first and last degrees.

Therein lay his quarrel with the critics, who, however distinguished, were necessarily the children and representatives of their age. He did not resent by any means their authoritative reflections on his style ; only he disputed the conclusions which they demanded of its reformation. He had no intention to chastise it into an admirable plain medium ; for

conveying lessons. A novelist's business in the first instance, he believed, was words, as an artist's was paint. Their arrangement, with an eye to artistic effects, was his leading consideration. If, in this respect, he waived his canons of literary faith, he would not be worthy of his ink-pot.

This is a little to anticipate matters ; but it will be seen that he started badly, inasmuch as his rather belated convictions took no account of the two essential factors in the case—that the public, the critic-influenced and decently-paying public, wanted neither art nor stories. They were both out of date.

The lesson came home by degrees ; but, in spite of its unwelcomeness, with not half the force of the understanding that the critics, for the most part, did not want them either. They might appreciate, according to their penchant, realism, sentiment, purpose, problem, analysis—one thing there was which they seldom regarded, and that was style ; or, if they did mention it, it was with some impatient disparagement, as a thing bothering and unnecessary.

That, however, was a later discovery. In the meantime, being disappointed in the manner of his recognition, though still hopeful and enthusiastic, he set himself, by persistent application to his art, to understand and correct his faults, to learn to eliminate redundancies, and to purify his style to that state and condition which should enforce some right acknowledgment of its values. The book which resulted met with a quite handsome *succès-d'estime* ; but all the obscurities of the former



work were charged to its account in redoubled measure. More, they were now pronounced wilful, and the author was plainly warned of the perilous path he was persisting in taking to his destruction.

Then John Wisdom first experienced what it was to be branded for art's sake in a practical age and country. The leading critics spoke, and he heard the pack take up the cry which they were never to forget against him. Fine craftsman as he was, he was often thereafter to hear himself made the butt of minds that could not manage a right sentence in syntax—even to hear himself accused of faulty grammar by reviewers who disgraced the first rules of it to say so.

At the first, good patient man, he tempered his soul to reason, and explained his views in a series of little essays on style which he contributed to a friendly paper. They bore the following motto from Goethe, which was characteristic of the writer, if hardly conciliatory of his critics :

*“ If a man sets out to reproach an author with obscurity, he should first of all examine his own mind to see if he himself is all clearness within. Twilight makes even plain writing illegible.”*

The series was commented on and approved. As a contribution to *belles-lettres*, it justified, *per se*, its own contentions. But when it came to applying those to novels, the case lost its point. The novel was not a subject for words, it appeared, but for matter pure and simple.

John Wisdom could not see it ; but it was no good. The fact was that he had committed the unpardonable sin at the outset, and was thence-

forth for all time a literary leper. When his bell rang, people sheered out of his way.

Then, at last, he grew wroth and obstinate, and vowed that for the future he would write for himself and himself alone. He had done so all the time, poor man, if he had only known.

At what period, he thought dismally, had this shyness of art developed into an almost morbid resentment? Had it been synchronous with the discovery of steam, and waxed virulent in the blaze of gas and electricity? Had "Marlowe's mighty line" revealed bacilli, like a washerwoman's, under the piercing eye of the modern microscope, and "melodious rivers" come to be regarded as mere storages for dynamic energy?

*"When science from Creation's face  
Enchantment's veil withdraws,  
What lovely visions yield their place  
To cold material laws."*

Marlowe surely had in his time been popular, in the democratic sense—and Shakespeare and Herrick and Addison and Johnson—fastidious word-artists all. What accounted for the prejudice against word-artistry nowadays? The finest thoughts must always depend, and depend solely, upon form for their impressiveness.

As to the question of story-telling, he could not bring himself to believe that it was a past and gone desideratum of a world which had grown to love not well but too wisely. Though cheap thoughts, cheap books, a cheap estimate of what was turned out in such incalculably cheap profusion might have sickened its digestion for the time, the

phase some day must pass with the complaint, and the right romancer come by his own again. Story-telling could never cease. It would have to go on and on through all the social and scientific evolutions of the world, until the soul of men itself should become a machine. There was always a little more than fact to be desired ; always some hope beyond the certainty, some dream beyond the reality. No, for the moment the *Art* of the storyteller was discredited—there lay the crux.

And it was the thankless task of such as he to try to vindicate it, in a cycle which wanted its reading as it ran, because, as with Alice and the red Queen, it took all the running one could do to keep in the same place—in a cycle which smelt of petrol, and roared on pneumatic tyres about the sun. Nevertheless he set himself, with no conceit, but a profound reverence for the beautiful, to what he considered his duty. For eight years longer he wrote and fought, a perpetually losing fight. He observed, as time passed, the critical creed to establish itself more and more on the contention that it did not much matter how you said a thing, so long as you had something to say. That seemed to him a tub-thumper's motto—the motto for any religious, or social, or political propagandist, but not the motto for Art, which is concerned solely with form and presentation. Sometimes, in a defiant desperation, he was almost moved to go to the opposite extreme ; to declare that manner came first in importance and matter second ; that, for Art's sake, it was sufficient to have nothing to say if you said it well. A sense of humour forbade him ;



and yet, in truth, Stella's boast about the broomstick might have been held his justification. What would that essay have yielded in the hands, say, of Martin Tupper?

Of the quality of his works during all this lengthy period I need not speak here. They exist to answer for themselves. I need only say that he produced them, virtually unfriended, in the face of cavilling, discouragement, and perpetually shrinking sales. Rewards there were, which must not be forgotten—many rare testimonies from unknown friends, who sympathised with his aims and aspirations. Kind as they were, they did not help his purpose. He had spoken the bare truth to Acton in saying that he published for money. It would be an affectation to pretend that any writer, however great, has done otherwise. From Shakespeare to Thackeray the family pot has been the first consideration. In the end, his quarrel with the critics was not that they had differed from his opinions, which any man, of course, was welcome to do, but that their differing had been systematically expressed in a manner calculated to keep him poor. He had been labelled as an "impossible"—a slander, as he knew on the authority of many an obvious illiterate to whom his work had appealed, and who had written spontaneously to thank him for it. The public, through its popular representatives, was invited, as his friend had intimated to him, to avoid him, and it was become a critical commonplace to consign his name to the index expurgatorius.

Then at last he decided that the term to the long

struggle was come, and that he must publish no more. He had neither the money nor the motive to do so at his own expense ; he could no longer in honour, he thought, accept any advances on royalties which were morally certain to fall short of them ; he must cease to impose himself, as it were, on the charity of the trade. Style was his literary epitaph. It was left to him to hope that posterity would honour it. His principles and ideals being in all questions Quixotic, he burned the residue of his manuscripts, and shook himself, with a laugh, a free man in the end.

This chapter has dealt solely with his literary life. There was a story outside it which he never told. And that begins here.

## CHAPTER III

NOBODY in London quite knew the real John Wisdom—his landlady, perhaps, best of all. She had stood in this relation to him for a full decade, and had had the completest experience of his general kindness and consideration. Outside the couple of rooms he rented in Westbourne Grove he was so shy of being known, apart from that fantastic world of which he was the professional showman, that there was no getting at him for most people. He belonged to a club, the Travellers', for which he had put up by Acton's advice, after the two had met at a common friend's, and when the novelist was yet in the first of his promise. But he seldom went there. He was a poor talker, unless when wholly at his ease or moved by some strong emotion, and no conversational match for the quick clever men with whom he was apt to come into contact. His views and dreams were not theirs, nor had he any of their controversial relish in talking for talking's sake. As to his writing contemporaries, there were a few for whom he had a sincere respect and admiration ; but he was little in personal touch with any. Cliques and coteries were abhorrent to him ; he lived really, for all his inner life, in the strange sweet Pagan countries of romance.

It was generally assumed, for any or no reason,



that he wrote under a pseudonym ; but what was his true name or what his past history not a soul seemed to know. Many, of course, attributed his unapproachableness to vanity ; others held him somewhat at “ Bozzy’s ” estimate of Goldsmith—a feckless pretender who could hardly say bo to a goose off paper. They were all wide of the mark. The stately workers, who maintain a quiet dignity of ideals through laughter and slander, know the baselessness of such charges. Yet they must suffer them, because to the vulgarian a fine belief in oneself is not to be distinguished from conceit. And, as to pusillanimity, Mr. Perceval Acton, who had a way of exalting himself at the expense of his acquaintances, might have had, had he chosen, an enlightening word to speak.

John Wisdom came home from that interview in an oddly humorous frame of mind. He hardly knew what had driven him to seek it—he had so perfectly foreseen the result. He supposed that some giddy perversity of mind, the intoxication of a liberated and unbalanced brain, had moved him to the folly. But he should not have been guilty of that assault on the poor little bounder. A moral inference was no evidence in law, and it was a lawyer whom he had lifted and pinned to the wall.

The fact was that, in spite of his constitutional equability, our gentleman was subject to occasional fits of rebellion and self-assertion, which drew at once from the tempers of indignation and laughter. He generally regretted them afterwards, because they seemed to court notoriety, and his soul abhorred notoriety, as distinguished from reputation,

in any form. But nature would "out" in him now and again.

For the great part his was one most sweetly philosophic—a nature which hated to inflict even so much pain as might be conveyed in an innuendo, a nature full of fellow-feeling and sympathy. Children were quite fearless with him. Women, though he had an Arcadian love for a face "all composed of flowers," never resented his scrutiny of them, or showed relief in escaping his company. The weak gathered a sense of protection in his presence. They felt instinctively, perhaps, what the aggressive seldom guessed, the strength of his arms. A tired, sleep-bemused work-girl has been known to sink her head upon his shoulder in a railway carriage, they two left alone together, and he has never moved until her station was reached and he had to wake her. And so, encountering her days later, his reward had been a blush and a bright confident smile. He had passions, but they owed nothing to grossness. "Style" penetrated into his moral nature, and was part and parcel of it. If Art is good "form," he justified his art as fully as any Quixote. He was as lovable a man as ever lacked a family.

Coming home, he sat down, with that rather exhausted look in his face, and let his eyes wander about the little dull room which had been his ark of literary refuge through ten inscrutable years. Nothing had changed in it during all that period except the wall-paper, whose original raw decorations of gold-leaf on a chocolate and crimson ground had been gradually absorbed into the general gloom,

until not even a hint of them answered to a side-squint along the wall. Now the paper itself had hung there so long that its pattern had grown problematic, and the plaster revealed through early staring rents in it could hardly be distinguished from itself. Elsewhere, the Victorian looking-glass over the mantelpiece, with its hopeless excrescences of scroll and vegetable ; the two dingy groups of wax flowers under glass shades ; the little black marble clock with gold-fluted edges, which stood obstinately to the ornamental mission of Time, and could never be persuaded to go for more than an hour on end, when it “struck,” and stopped work ; the fearful German lithographs on the wall, of a woolly Christ bidding little flocky children to come to Him, and of the entry into Jerusalem on an unbreakable donkey, the two supporting an intermediate presentment, in enlarged photography, of the late Mr. Spurgeon ; the specimens of heraldic china on stained corner brackets ; the cheap mahogany chairs and the chenille tablecloth—all remained exactly as his eyes had first encountered them. Yet with what a conquering resolve had he first entered here upon the struggle with his destiny ; with what a pleasant gratification had he noted the earliest acclamations which had greeted his efforts ! He thought it had needed some resolution at the beginning only to master the influence of his surroundings—the dreary habitat, the dreary outlook, the endlessly dreary contemplation of social secondrateness in a shoppy suburb. Some men, no doubt, might have gathered inspiration from such an environment



—men to whose curious interest the wonderfully petty affairs of everyday life were inexhaustibly stimulating. He was never one of them. The acute analysis of feminine intimacies and boudoir scandals, the minute dissection of the infinitely commonplace, had no attraction for him. In his heart he held it all rather cheap and tame-catty. Romance, to his mind, was the only right business and justification of the male writer. It should be his strong leading purpose to pioneer world-oppressed souls into the countries of self-forgetfulness, and he believed that he had fairly vindicated his principle in his triumph over an uncongenial atmosphere. He loathed the cant of the strenuous life, with its coarse philosophy of realism. Up to what glimmering light had the soul of man been struggling from the mire throughout these countless æons? Why, to the lamp burning before the shrine of the unknown God—the pole-star of the imagination. And then to be bid to drop one's silly dreams, and shed one's useless wings, and to move on—run on—round and round the world, content with it and never above it! He was certainly born out of his time. Word-magic in this was a drug in the market, and the cant of strenuosity ruled high. The papers preached it. A slur of femininity had come to attach itself to the voice which had no more practical purpose than music in its song. The author of "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" would have been stoned in these days. Why could not, should not, all life develop along the accredited lines of beauty? and why did it seem eternally impossible to the human race, in its

phases of development, to exalt one passion without depreciating another? John Wisdom started from this paragraph of brooding with a shake and a laugh.

"I don't believe the world's even epitomised in Westbourne Grove," said he. "I'll take my knapsack, and go and look for some place in it where they haven't grown too clever to listen to stories."

He had an idea that art might still find a home and welcome among the Latin races. In France, at least, it stood honoured in one right literary direction, which was wholly debarred to the English writer. Surely a prose troubadour might win a bay-leaf in the country of De Maupassant. But what did it matter? It was not a single bay-leaf he had coveted, but a whole Tracy Turnerelli wreath of beaten gold. His main purpose defeated, why should he claim it of necessity to write again at all? For the future his art should be at the service of idle inclination alone. He would go and saunter in the pleasant places of the world, and sing or be silent as his mood impelled him. Whither first was the question.

*"Oh, what's the way to Arcady,  
To Arcady, to Arcady;  
Oh, what's the way to Arcady,  
Where all the leaves are merry?"*

he chaunted to himself.

His face fell suddenly into a strange wistful expression. The lovely little fancy was dear to his heart and brain. It had been written by a very true American poet, long dead, and never in his day,

or after it, appreciated at his real melodious value. He recalled what followed with a sigh :—

*“ What, know you not, old man (quoth he)—  
Your hair is white, your face is wise—  
That Love must kiss that Mortal’s eyes  
Who hopes to see fair Arcady?  
No gold can buy you entrance there;  
But beggared Love may go all bare—  
No wisdom won with weariness;  
But Love goes in with Folly’s dress—  
No fame that wit could ever win;  
But only Love may lead Love in  
To Arcady, to Arcady.”*

Not gold, no. And yet, after all, he was better off than the ragged pilgrim with the worn shoon. He need never starve by the way. His patrimony remained to him, and even something more than that.

He had made a little money in his time, of course—nothing great—relatively about enough, say, to pay for a popular author’s or actor’s motor-keep. Steadily facing that odd purpose of his, he had put most of it by, perpetually regarding the little accumulation as only the nucleus of a rolling fortune. The balance he had devoted to small economic trips abroad—to Italy chiefly. Now the capital—some four or five hundred pounds—remained; and, shorn of his purpose, he was rich. He would give his landlady notice, he resolved, and go abroad again in search of Arcady. He was sure it could lie nowhere in England—as sure as Cotton’s fool, who roamed abroad for the jewel of happiness which lay all the time on his own hearthstone. What a strange mistake for an imaginative writer! but he



was guilty of it in his supposed disillusionment. And, if he might never enter Arcady, he thought he might chance on its gate, where he would sing for pence from the folk going in.

That same afternoon he put his resolve into execution—packed a frugal knapsack ; burned all his remaining manuscripts ; destroyed whole sheaves of newspaper cuttings—or clippings, a better word which comes from America, for cuttings suggest new life and promise, which these did not—and called up his landlady.

The good woman raised a lamentable outcry ; the little slavey echoed it noisily from the kitchen. He pacified them as well as he was able ; he gilded the occasion recklessly. Nothing availed. In the end he left them inconsolable and fled—fled to Waterloo, where he booked third-class for Southampton, intending to cross to Havre, the cheapest route. At the station he gulped down a strong drink on a famished stomach, with the result that, fuddled and exhausted, he fell fast asleep presently in the carriage. A confused, and seemingly exaggerated hubbub awoke him suddenly, and he recognised that the train was at a standstill. Utterly at sea, he tumbled out upon a platform, with a vague feeling that he had overshot his mark. It was only when the train had been restarted, and he had walked, a little unsteadily, out of the station, that he discovered that, so far from imposing on the Company, he had given up his ticket for Southampton at Winchester, and was adrift, at half-past eight o'clock in the evening, in the antique cathedral city.

When so much of his wits had returned to him, he halted to consider the situation. Conscious of appearances, he was really ashamed to go back and avow his mistake and reclaim his ticket. Besides, the evening was heavenly, the place attractive, and he an unattached vagabond. It would serve his purpose just as well, and more characteristically, to tramp the rest of his journey by road on the morrow, and take present advantage of the hour which the imps of mischief had imposed on him. He pulled out his pipe, and bent his steps for the rising ground. It was always better to go up-hill than down.

## CHAPTER IV

KEEPING the line of the railway for a little, John Wisdom presently came out upon a ghostly cemetery, with tall railings climbing an inhabited lane among trees. The road that mounted beside was silent and deserted—a glimmering stairway, it seemed, for the dead, trodden white with their footprints and tilted against a white sky. Up it he went, nevertheless, rejoicing in the cooler blow of air upon his hot forehead, and in the deep wells of leafiness which he left behind and beneath him as he rose. By-and-by he turned, and heaved out a great sigh of satisfaction. Below him, half-way down the slope, ran a long line of barrack buildings, above and beyond whose red-glowing windows showed a phantom hill, all veiled in a dusky opaline mist which drew from some hidden waters in the valley between. This mist was of the loveliest most translucent blue, and here and there lights twinkled through it, like stars through a milky casement, until, shining out brighter as they neared the summit, they emerged there in a crest of pure radiance, revealing the dim outlines of a little comb of houses which stood up clear of the rising vapour. Thence, all along the horizon going southwards, ran a haze of floating hills, which were submerged finally in glassy distances of wood and sky, while the



whole basin of the plain beneath was mapped with softest tints of gold and pale green and verdant blotches of darkness, amidst whose network were sown innumerable spangles of light.

All the hues of poetry were in that lovely slumber-scene ; he seemed to be gazing down on the scattered camp of a fairy legion. And the glow-worm jewels were human dwellings, that was all. A monster roared below him in a cleft of the ascent, trailing thunder, and leaving fiery sparks suspended in the trees behind it, it appeared. Those were the signals going up in the wake of the London express. O, the lust of scurry, and the tyranny of wheels ! How the ensuing hush was dear to him by contrast !

*" The sweetest sounds are those most near akin to silences,  
Such as sea whispers rippling at the prow  
When the loud engine ceases."*

It spoke the fulness of the peace before him. There were still leafy solitudes to be gained, thank God—primitive places where the clock turned upon the creak of the carter's wain.

The dust and the fume of the uproar settled down. He climbed on and came out into country roads, and bathed his spirit in a silence so profound that it was like oblivion. Then, at last, possessed of a strenuous desire for food and bed, he turned and descended again into the ancient city.

The next morning, before resuming his journey, he went down to see the old grey cathedral—Peter's very rock, he had hoped to find it, rooted in immemorial pastures, a fane of antique solitude. Some military function was afoot in the town, and the place was crowded. The whole green yard

was a swarm of soldiers and civilians and police, representing the three great orders of the human family. The nucleus of the gathering revealed a motley of aldermen, in cocked hats and scarlet dressing-gowns, of councillors, like queer blue beetles standing solemnly on their hind-legs, of magnificent captains involved in the proceedings, and of others their guests, who gave as much of their countenance to them as could be gathered into a chin-strap between stock and busby.

These were the rich pieces of the kaleidoscope, perpetually agitated and changing; and, for the rest, the entire population of the place, it seemed, looked on, including, to suit the martial occasion, a thousand suffering and befurbelowed babies-in-arms.

It was not—alas for the unforgettable tranquillity of last night's vision!—what our unclubbable vagabond had hoped or expected. Nevertheless, as one pledged to philosophic solitudes, the scene had its passing attraction for him. As he stood apart regarding it, he fell to wondering how much visible expression of nature it all conveyed. Nineteen-twentieths, perhaps, of it, or ninety-nine-hundredths, stood for sartorial embellishments of every fantastic order, meaningless, distorting, monkeyish. The odd fraction was represented by hundreds of little white faces, bobbing and mowing amidst a sea of clothes—mopping, too, for the day was sultry. He tried to imagine to himself what the effect would be, were Nature suddenly to assert herself and whisk away these ridiculous habiliments, leaving the whole assemblage stark. A little colourless and monotonous, no doubt; but the gain

to herself! He could picture the rush for leaves and branches, the letting down of hair, the shapely attitudes and groupings begot of shame and unfettered emotion. And then the instinctive recapture of the sense of form in Nature, as necessity had first appropriated it to herself with no thought of rivalry. Raiment, not millinery; the pretty sandals on her feet, the lovely cross-bands standing her for stays, and thence the falling pleated lines undulating to each movement of her unshackled limbs; the crowning radiance of her hair, just coiled and knotted as her hands alone might bestow it. There was loveliness in the thought—ease, health, and harmony; a world of sick disorders, moreover, physical, moral, and social, banished at a stroke. And, instead! these monstrous gargoyles of convention, pinched and muffled and smothered up to the neck and down to the feet in extravagances that defied every principle of comfort and grace! Don't tell him that that fat old woman looked better sweltering in a tight padded "confection," with a bonnet like a fancy saddle on her head, than she would in stole and peplum, the plain and dignified shawl of the Greeks. Don't tell him that that grotesque travesty of a man, perspiring in a frock coat and screeching boots, and with his bald head smoking appropriately under a chimney-pot, was a happier object than he would be clothed in tunic, pallium, sandals, and the simple petasus or Hermes hat. What more than those could one desire for ease, warmth, and elegance? No soul could look ridiculous in such—no, not the bald, nor the gross, nor the rubicund, nor the runty man. What devil



was in it all? Surely the first tempter must have been a tailor before he became a serpent.

Simplicity in dress! O, that mankind could be induced to revert to it—no dreadful “rational” compromises, but a giant holocaust of everything not graceful or essential. What an astonishing world-wide revolution the thought implied!—the annihilation of “Fashion”; the minds of millions emancipated from a degrading bondage and opened to the revelations of truth uncramped and fearless; an awakening realisation of the real human relationship, unjarred by green envies and fulsome emulations; a gradual convalescence from the thousand ills for which the countless follies of “dressing-up” were responsible. Bodily adornment ousted from its first to a quite unimportant place in the human estimation—artificiality a dead quantity! It was strangest of all to think of woman so manumitted, of her new meaning in life, and her influence in directions hitherto unexplored by her. One thing at least was certain: the beauty of her would emerge, whether for destruction or redemption, a cataclysmic force. She would make cleanness admirable, and Mr. Jonathan Swift, her one-time detractor, a hated name.

All mortal filth and abomination, all meanness, jealousy, and hypocrisy had progressed, since the beginning of history, thought John Wisdom, in right ratio with the progressive mania of dress. Clothes were the shibboleth of the modern Gileadites, of whom nine-tenths of the entire world were come to be composed. Man was not judged by what he was, but by what he wore.

Quite suddenly a bat of black depression seized and fastened on him. What was he doing, mooning and philosophising in this province of a hostile country? What appeal was possible from such as he, a despised and unregarded dreamer, to these massed legions of ugliness? The common mind, the common view, the common subscription to a creed of superlatively unimaginative commonness, permeated them from hem to hem. In all their laughter, their allusions, their approbations or disapprobations, expressed within the paltry limits of a code of social proprieties too narrow to embrace one original thought or reflection, what invitation was there to the eloquence of an independent mind? And it was these who epitomised mankind; and it was such as these, the great body of public opinion, whom the critics represented, for whom they ruled and discriminated and catered! He wished he had never published a book. He felt like a lord of flowering acres, who, having thrown his gardens open to the populace, repents too late, over desecrated borders, the folly of his utilitarianism. Sorry and disenchanted, he turned and left the scene, the streets, the town, and started on his way for Southampton.

The quiet of the long sunny road soon restored him in a measure to himself; but the sense of alienage remained. He passed some open downs, and read a notice-board requesting the public to confine itself to the beaten paths thereover. The beaten paths, good God! What a file of geese was mankind! This whole breezy common at its command, and content to be ruled across it in prescrip-

tive lines ! His heart flamed up in sympathy with all rebellious vagabonds ; but there were not enough of them in the world to pay him for writing his books.

He went on again, feeling somehow the weight of his knapsack, though it was not really heavy. But it was a drag on his nerves of motion, incessantly eager to escape the high-roads of civilisation. Mile by mile a sense of toil-worn loneliness grew upon him, until, utterly overcome by it, he suddenly, in a wooded hollow, lying some three miles short of his destination, threw himself down by the roadside to gnaw and devour his mood. He thought that morbid and irrational, but it was not so. It was the overwhelming reaction from that artificial gaiety which had succeeded his great renunciation. Completely alone with himself at last, the significance of his act, stripped of all adventitious support, came to shake him like an ague. The fumes of his "Dutch courage" were evaporated. He seemed to have no longer any motive for existing ; his literal *raison d'être* was ruled away.

"Hullo !" said an odd gruff voice, somewhere from the near woods behind him.

John Wisdom started, and turned round. The trees were close and high in this sleepy hollow, and the tracks between them led into dense green silences. There seemed to be nothing stirring in all the drowsy place. Only the thump of a falling cone occasionally accented the stillness. Not a grasshopper chirruped, not a wood-pigeon crooned. The road, glaring white in the sun, brought no beat of any distant footfall. He thought he must have been dozing.



“Hullo ! ” said the voice again.

John Wisdom rose very softly, and, pausing a moment to focus his direction, trod tiptoe in among the trees. The underwood was thick with brambles pretty difficult to penetrate. But a revived sense of adventure thrilled him on, and in a little he was well in, his eyes and ears scrupulously alert.

Who was it ? What was it ? He paused in a little dappled clearing, and looked about him. Not a sound or movement anywhere answered to his scrutiny. It was queer, and a trifle uncanny. A shallow ditch, or depression, lay immediately at his feet, but so overgrown with thorns and ferns that he did not suspect it. He took one step forward, plunged, stumbled, and shot upon his hands and knees by the side of a thick bramble-bush on the farther side. And there was a boy lying flat on his stomach in the grass.

John Wisdom gathered himself together, and sat wonderingly in the fern, his hands clasped about his knees. The recumbent youth slewed a startled white face at him, but neither moved nor spoke.

“Was it you that hailed me ? ” said John.

The boy did not answer.

“Come,” said John, “I’m not offended. Was it you ? ”

“No, sir. It was Ferdinand.”

Not a craven voice at all ; a little trembling, but on the whole oddly self-composed.

“Ferdinand, was it ? What’s become of him ? ”

“He’s a parrot, sir.”

The ghost of a gurgle, the ghost of a struggle, issued from under the concealed arms.

“O, I see!” said John. “You’ve got him there. Is he yours?”

“Yes, he is.”

“What made you bring him out for an airing?”  
(A momentary suspicion crossed his mind that it might be a case of theft.)

No answer.

“Come,” said the man.

“He was going to wring his neck, sir.”

“*He*——!”

John Wisdom stopped on the word, and sat considering.

“Tell me the truth, old fellow,” he said, at last, winningly smiling and humorous. “I won’t blab or lecture—on my honour I won’t. What have you done?”

The boy sat up, a little muddy and disordered, and revealed a ruffled green parrot, of a hoary but vagabond aspect, clasped in his arms.

John Wisdom smiled.

“I’ve run away, sir,” said the boy.

John Wisdom’s eyes opened wide in a startled delight.

“Hooray!” said he; “so have I!”

## CHAPTER V

THE man of thirty-five and the boy of fourteen sat on the grass considering one another. The man had bright observant eyes, an eager expression, and rather haggard cheeks. He was dressed in a Norfolk jacket of sober grey tweed, with a rimmed cap on his head of the same material ; and his grey flannel trousers were tucked into half-Wellington boots. He seemed, when conversing, to listen with his mouth, the lips pricked, as it were, and the teeth showing in an arrested smile. His face was as pink as a boy's, though its short fringe of a moustache was already prematurely grizzled. He *was*, in fact, a boy at heart, subject to a boy's impulses and inconsequences, and even to his occasional wild inanities.

The actual boy, the boy of fourteen, hardly looked his age physically, but, mentally, something more than it. He had a wonderfully refined, delicate face, of a thin, elfish cast, and with large immature greenish eyes holding wisdom in solution. His short hair was ashen brown, and his eyebrows, of a slightly darker tone, were curiously broad and thick. *His* cheeks, also, gave an impression of haggardness, to which the full red lips between added a touch of infant pathos ; but, for all his truancy, he seemed to possess himself very oddly



and maturely. His clothes were quite good and orthodox, and he looked the small shapely gentleman that he was. He wore no hat. If he had brought one with him, it had flown off and sunk in the brake.

Subterfuge being any longer useless, the green parrot made a casual third in the conversation which ensued.

“Supposing,” said John Wisdom, “I were to ask you for an explanation—I’ve no right to, of course—but would you give it me?”

The boy considered a little, thoughtful-eyed and unflurried.

“Yes, I would,” he said.

“Very well. Where have you run away from?”

“Southampton.”

“From school?”

“No; from his house.”

“Whose house? Have you any relations?”

“No, sir; not one.”

“What, then?”

“Only Mr.——”

“Stop a moment. You mean the individual who wanted to wring its neck there?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t want his name. I don’t want any names. So you ran away with Ferdinand to save him from the despoiler?”

“Yes, sir.”

“A generous, perhaps, but an improvident action. And where are you going to run to?”

“London, sir.”

“And when you get there?”

The boy hesitated.

“Hullo!” said the parrot. He had stood on his dignity for some time, being rather crushed and touzled; but finding his attitude evoked no sympathy, had decided to forgive and forget.

“O, you!” said John Wisdom. “Well, what is your master going to do with himself in London?”

The bird, craning up from the boy’s arm where he sat, coquetted for his attention, sidling his bill up and down the lapels of his coat and dancing with his thick legs. Then he paused, with a yellow eye slewed at the stranger.

“Hullo, George,” he said. “Tell us a story.”

The boy put a hand over the bird’s head. The parrot routled with his iron bill among the fingers, mouthing them harmlessly. John Wisdom essayed a warning.

“I’d leave all the talking to my master, Ferdinand, if I were you,” he said. “Who knows who may be listening?”

He bent forward and tapped the boy’s shoulder gently.

“I’m afraid, little master truant,” said he, “that, with the best intentions in the world, you’ve rather tethered yourself by the leg in your bolt for liberty.”

The boy looked up, open-mouthed. John pointed to the parrot.

“He talks, you see,” he said. “He might give more interested people than I a clue to your whereabouts.”

The boy’s mouth shut, and his lips quivered a little.

“I don’t think he’ll bother to look for me at all,”

he said. "He's told me often enough I'm a curse and an imposition."

"Meaning, again, the potential garotter? But, for his own reputation, you know, he'll have to. He'll have to tell the police."

"Then he won't tell them of Ferdinand. He won't really want them to find me. He's always hoped I would do it—or something worse; I know that well enough. But I stood it as long as I could, for—for her sake; and I'd have gone on standing it, unless—I've never in all my life been without Ferdinand."

For the first time he showed a hint of some rising emotion. John Wisdom went and sat by him.

"Look here," he said—he had a peculiarly soft and caressing voice for a man, an inheritance from a Welsh mother—"you've run away, and I've run away. I said so, didn't I? Well, if *you'll* confide in me, *I'll* confide in you—but no names, mind. Is it a bargain?"

The parrot cracked an imaginary nut. The boy lifted him to his face, on which he made a show of sharpening his bill. A tear trickled over the green back.

"Very well, sir," came in rather muffled tones from the feathery covert.

John Wisdom put a light kind hand on the bent shoulders.

"Was she, for whom you bore it, your mother, old fellow?" he said.

The boy wiped his eyes on the bird, and jerked up his head with a slightly defiant action.



“ Yes, she was,” he said.

“ Ah ! ” said John. “ There’s a story there, I suppose.”

The parrot caught the word, and chuckled over it delightedly.

“ My eyes ! ” he said. “ Speak up, George.”

“ He wanted to marry my mother before she married my father,” said the boy. “ And, after my father’s death, he did marry her, whether she liked it or not, and made her pay for what she’d done, both her and me till she died, and afterwards me alone. There’s no more story than that.”

“ I see. We’ve identified the garotter so far. How did he make *you* pay ? ”

The boy leaned forward, sniffing. His eyes seemed to frown on a rather hopeless prospect.

“ I don’t think you’d understand if I tried to explain,” he said. “ It might seem nothing, if you didn’t know.”

“ Try, nevertheless. I’ve got a sort of intelligence. It’s been my trade to skin people and look into their motives.”

“ Has it ? Are you a doctor ? ”

“ No. I’ll tell you what by-and-by. What did he do to you ? ”

“ He made me work at figures all day—and all night, too, because I couldn’t get them out of my head.”

John Wisdom did not laugh.

“ As an imposition ? ” he said.

“ Yes,” said the boy ; “ only one that never ended. It was because I loved reading books. So he had every one taken out of the house, except double

entries, and differential calculus, and logarithms, and a lot more of that sort. That was three years ago, when my tutor, Mr. Vertue, was sent away ; and I've been doing sums and calculations ever since."

" But why that particular form of torture ? "

" To counteract the poisonous trash with which I'd been filling my mind, he told me. To prepare me for the destiny he'd ruled out for me. I was to be chained to a desk like a galley-slave—only to wield an office-pen instead of an oar."

Odd words from a boy. Was the little creature an acting prig or a real original ? John Wisdom shot a queer look at him. The young throat was gulping, and a single tear was slowly rolling down the cheek that was nearest.

" I suppose you didn't fancy that sort of a career at all ? " said the man.

The boy swallowed resolutely, still looking before him.

" I should like to be an artist, or an author, or something sweetly inventive," he said.

John Wisdom took off his hat in a sudden spasm, looked into it, and put it on again.

" No turn for figures ? " he asked.

The boy shook his head.

" He wouldn't have forced them on me if I had," he said. " He called it putting me in the road to earn my living ; but he meant it to drive me to madness, or suicide."

; " Hush, young man ! These are no words for an infant. Why did he threaten to kill the parrot ? "

" Because it was all that was left that he hadn't

killed. He used it for the last, when he found that I wouldn't break for all his bending. The man was to have come this morning to fetch it away."

"He didn't ill-treat you personally?"

"O no! I wish he had. It wouldn't have been so bad."

John Wisdom rose hastily, and, pacing to and fro half-a-dozen times, came and stood, caressing his chin, over the youngster.

"Wouldn't you agree," he said, "like the highly intelligent boy you are, that it was my duty, as a rational being, to take you back to Southampton?"

The boy started, and looked up in his face breathlessly. And then he broke into a queer shaky smile.

"I was sure you didn't mean it," he said.

John Wisdom laughed, and sat plump down by him again.

"Meaning," said he, "that you don't recognise the rational being in me. Well, well. Aren't you going to ask me what *I* ran away from?"

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"From the critics, sir. I am an author myself. *They* tried to drive *me* to madness, too."

"An author!" His face lighted up with wonder and a certain awe. "You have written books?"

"Lots of them. It's possible that, as a youthful bibliophile, you may have come across one—'The Roaring Forties.' It was written for boys."

The youngster's face went pink with delight.

"*You* wrote that," he said. "I should think I have. It was good all through—the taste of it was quite different from most."

John took off his hat.



"Thank you," said he. "I am your very good friend. I wish more had been of your opinion."

The boy regarded him shyly and rosily.

"I thought there were to be no names, sir?" he said.

"I made a mistake," said John. "But you must forget it; and anyhow it's only a pen name. Yes, I'm running away from the critics. Shall we run together?"

The insane suggestion shot out of him without a thought. It was only the instant readiness of its reception which made him realise in a flash what he had done.

"O, if you wouldn't mind!"

John Wisdom rose to his feet, and bade the boy do the same. The occasion seemed to demand uprightness and gravity. He looked seriously into the anxious immature eyes.

"Do you really realise the step you are proposing to yourself?" he said—"a perfect stranger to you like me?"

"You dedicated that book, sir, to all boys; and one ran away in it."

"Great Mogul! so he did. Well, *I* was on my way to Southampton. That's knocked on the head. For obvious reasons we can't go there. What remains? London, you say. Supposing I take you there and leave you? Do you know it's necessary for one to live?"

"Not always, sir, according to Talleyrand."

"Talleyrand! Listen to him! Is this Mr. Vertue speaking, or what! You precious precocity! You are sure you have no relations in the world?"

“Quite sure, sir.”

“And that you would rather die than go back to him, the unnameable?”

“I would rather die with Ferdinand than live without him, sir.”

“Bless the parrot! I’d forgotten all about him. We can’t travel with that damning evidence on your wrist. Where’s your hat?”

“I dropped it somewhere in the bushes, when I heard you coming and bolted in.”

“Too great a waste of time to hunt for it. Look here; hide in the fern till I come back. I won’t treat you as the ruffian ‘of mildest mood’ treated the poor babes. Only on your life keep *him* there quiet.”

He made a cautious circuit, tiptoeing out of the wood. The road, when he regained it, was still silent and empty. He remembered that he had passed through a little village, with a station and a shop or two, some mile back, and now he made for it with all the speed he could accomplish. His thoughts were in a whirl; but the sense of loneliness and depression was entirely gone. What astonishing responsibility was he undertaking? But he didn’t care. Fortune had engaged him to a psychological crisis, and he would be untrue to himself if he regarded it rationally. He was a vagabond; he had returned to Nature; and it was Nature in such as he to help the afflicted. Reflection, in all the emergencies of life, meant self-consideration, and self-consideration ended, where charity began, at home. And, as to the future, Providence was the agreeable mother who settled

all disputes. So long as you trusted her, you need make no provision on your own account, or forestall possible explanations. He believed that the boy had spoken truth—that he was an abhorred and harassed encumbrance, whose very life was grudged him. But for this accident, he might, if followed and trapped, have been insidiously manœuvred out of it. An inexpressible villainy! and he such an odd, sedate, intelligent little soul—a spirit, though in its immaturity, kindred to his own, he felt. And how was he himself to be blamed or held accountable for another's whim? He could as little persuade the child from his terror or his determination, as he could abandon him to the certain fate which the latter involved. Imagine the delicate little oddity adrift in London, with his parrot and his face and his nice clothes! He had been proposing to walk there, he concluded, and presumably with empty pockets. Well, he was only acting the part of a good-natured carrier in giving the boy a lift.

But why to London at all? Why, the General Post Office was in London—reason enough; it was the centre for redistribution. It was of no instant importance to him whither he gravitated. He hardly gave a thought to his own abandoned trip. That was a story of yesterday; and wasn't he a typical romancer, enthusiastic over new ideas, and apt to leave unfinished the tale which dissatisfied him? Choice of subject was often half the battle.

He reached the village, his nerves and blood all in a hurrying tingle, and was successful in procuring a little closed hand-basket, and a boy's grey



felt hat with a flapping brim. With these he returned to the woods, and found, with some difficulty, his small panting quarry.

“Now,” said he, “put that on, and cage Master Ferdinand. We go to Chandler’s Ford, take train there for Eastleigh, and thence for London. But listen to this first. No identities now or ever. It wouldn’t be diplomatic. I’ve thought it all out, on the basis of a woodland adventure. Your name’s Robin Goodfellow, and mine Herne the Hunter. No titles. Do you understand, Robin?”

“Yes, Herne.”

“Then a good foot forward, and the Fates protect us.”

## CHAPTER VI

“HERE,” said Mr. Herne (we have to call him so for the time being), “is an impressionable, imaginative boy escaped from the grip of an insensate monster who was determined to crush all the divine grace out of him under a mathematical sledge-hammer—to ‘extract roots,’ the coarse Grad-grind, from a flower-of-the-air. Do you pretend to call it my duty, in a free country, to return this pitiful alien upon the hands of the ‘Timour-Mammon,’ from whose mechanical torturings he has at last succeeded in extricating himself?”

Mr. Raxworthy, senior, of Lincolns’ Inn Fields, sat in his padded revolving chair, placidly weighing and appraising this impetuous client. He was an old thin man, nicely groomed, with sleek yellowish white hair, a large blunt nose, grey side-whiskers, and enormous eyebrows. His collar was very full, and embraced by a black satin cravat tied into a bow of ample proportions. Gold-rimmed pince-nez dangled on a broad black ribbon against his waistcoat buttons; he held his finger-tips, with their scrupulously trimmed and polished nails, poised lightly together in front of him; his expression was caustic, but not unsympathetic.

“My dear Mr. Herne,” said he, “(since that appears to be our latest *alias*), I pretend nothing. It is your duty.”

“Then damn my duty!” said Mr. Herne.

The lawyer smiled.

“Not for the first time, I’m afraid.”

The client took an apple from his coat-pocket, and began to eat it.

“Soothes me,” he said. “There’s such a juice and fragrance of Nature in it. Not for the first time, you say? I hope you don’t propose opening that closed book again?”

“No? You don’t feel any re-awakened curiosity to look into it?”

“Not an atom. Besides it’s chained and padlocked these years past, and I’ve thrown away the key.”

“Then that settles it. But you haven’t thrown away, I perceive, your Quixotry—to give it the sort of name you’d like. I should give it another myself.”

“Pigheadedness, wouldn’t you?”

“Quite—or worse. So this is your latest whim of idealotry—if there is such a word. It fits your irrational worship of dreams and figments, anyhow. What do you propose doing?”

“Why are you a lawyer if you can’t give me advice?”

“That, sir, is its own explanation. I *sell* it.”

“I’m not at all sure I can pay.”

“Aren’t you? I’m delighted to hear it.”

“Why, Raxworthy?”

“Gives me a sort of hope that you may be coming at length to realise your folly. Do you know I’ve been rejoiced to watch the gradual course of your failure in the profession you chose for yourself.”

“That’s rather devilish,” said the client, munch-



ing his apple. "Do you conclude I am a failure, then?"

"I should think that for every ten that wanted to read you at the beginning, ten thousand didn't, and that now you might knock off the nought from the first ten to represent the odds."

"You're about right. Why is it? Am I a bad author?"

"I don't know or care a brass button. I've never read one of your books. The point with me is that you're a bad man of business, and haven't the least instinct for commanding your own interests. I suppose, as a matter of fact, you've applied your principles to this, as to other matters with which we are acquainted. Well, are you satisfied at last that you've made a big mistake?"

"Good gracious, no! I've made no mistake."

The lawyer threw himself back in his chair with a renunciatory grunt.

"O, very well, I suppose!" said he. "The leopard can't change his spots. You'll still be—O, we mustn't mention names, of course! What an extraordinary—there's nothing so queer as folk. Well, I've given you my advice—send the boy back!"

Mr. Herne took a penny from his pocket, and held it out.

"Here you are, Raxworthy," he said. "Never mind about the change. Now I want something really good for the next—a natural, unsophisticated, not Christian but Christ-like, piece of advice—say a shillingsworth."

The lawyer's acrid face creased into a smile. He accepted the penny, and pocketed it.

“ I confess it wasn’t worth very much more,” he said. “ Well, now, discounting something, a good deal, for your vehemence and over-drawing, how do you know the despot is as heartless or the victim as virtuous as painted ? You’ve only half the evidence, and lop-sided at that.”

“ I’ve graduated, my friend, in the school of character. I recognise the truth when I hear it spoken.”

The lawyer let his hands drop upon the arms of his chair, and, giving his body a wriggle from the hips, broke fairly into cackling laughter.

“ *You* do, my good sir ? O, really, really ! Why, any plausible rogue could turn you round his little finger. There, don’t look hurt. I always respect your motives. But supposing—there, anything. The world is full of villainies. Imagine, for instance, that this is a plot to bleed you. Is your pocket prepared to stand the racket ? ”

“ In all these years I’ve made very little money—quite a trifle, you would think it ; but I fear no villainy of that sort. Raxworthy,” he said, with some solemnity, “ as sure as I am that a fine generous heart beats under this professional reserve of yours, so sure am I that you would be the first, if you interrogated the boy, to believe in his essential truthfulness. O, I don’t say that you would draw quite the same conclusions from it as myself. That is a question, perhaps, of temperament and affinity. But you would want to rescue him, as I do ; though, no doubt, you would go the legal way to work. What is it, when all’s said ? ”

“ There isn’t one.”

“Not? But supposing it a fact that this man has really, as he says, been manœuvring to provoke him to the step, and, the step taken, washes his hands of him?”

“That’s begging the question.”

“Beg it, then, and tell me if I should be justified in adopting him.”

“You may hob-nob, if you like, with any vagabond you pick up on the road. My advice is—knowing you as I do—to take none. You never will, you know, unless it fits in with your predilections. That’s disinterested of me, of course; but I don’t mind foregoing my six-and-eightpence in your case. You interest me, though I think you a fool. Go your fool’s way, in God’s name, and wear a barber’s basin on your head if you like. You’ve found your Sancho Panza. Where do you propose taking him?”

“Somewhere remote. I thought of Italy.”

The lawyer did not answer for a moment. He was pondering an inspiration which had flashed upon him quite unexpectedly. He balanced all the pros and cons in his mind before he responded.

“Why not Wales?”

“Wales? Why?”

“Why not? It’s as remote in its way. Besides, you are half a Welshman. You would be at home there.”

The client considered. Wales! His mother’s land. The land of mists and soft-voiced women, and melancholy Celtic imageries. The spirit of romance should linger there, if anywhere. Yes, he rather inclined to Wales.



Mr. Raxworthy watched him with a certain suppressed excitement.

“ Well,” he said presently, with an affectation of indifference, “ I don’t pretend to direct the course of the rolling stone ; but it seems to me a good idea, and, if anything unpleasant *should* come to happen, we should be reasonably accessible to one another. I’m pretty familiar, by the way, with one little place on the Merionethshire coast, which I think should offer everything attractive in the way of removedness that cranks such as you could desire—sea, mountains, forests, and a virtual immunity from trippers. Its name’s *Caer Gollwyn*. I can recommend it. The spot’s teeming with legends.”

The client looked up, with a sudden bright decision in his face.

“ *Caer Gollwyn* it shall be,” he said. He rose, dropped the remains of his apple into the waste-paper basket, and held out his hand. “ Good-bye, Raxworthy, and thank you.”

The lawyer suppressed a little sigh of triumph.

“ You come and go at long intervals,” he said ; “ but I’m far from forgetting you. You’ll write, I suppose, if you want me. Where have you deposited your protégé ? ”

“ At my old rooms. Such a demure little original, Raxworthy. I look to great interests and discoveries there. Good-bye.”

The lawyer left alone, stood for some moments deeply reflecting.

“ H’m ! ” he muttered at last. “ It may or mayn’t—just a possibility—but it was worth venturing. A crank, if ever there was one ! ”

## CHAPTER VII

TOWARDS the end of the last decade of the last century, Miss May Flowerdew had been one of our most popular comédiennes of the variety order. She had figured brilliantly in operetta ; had played principal boy in several gloriously spectacular pantomimes ; and had not, in her off seasons, disdained the Music Hall stage, where her “ Dramatic Moments ” were still remembered and quoted. She was astonishingly shapely, resourceful, and impudent ; she could dance like an Ariel, sing like a robin, and return you your verbal insolences with a tongue as ready at riposte as M. Angelo’s foil, the point whisking away your waistcoat buttons, as it were, and exposing in a flash the pretentious “ dickey ” underneath. Like the best of her class, too, she was innately modest—as most women are ; and only fought the battle of self-preservation cunningly with the weapons with which Nature had gifted her. Being thus modest, sprightly, clever, and sensible, she had made a providence of her wits, had calculated to a frill, like Longfellow’s lady, the exact amount it was judicious to show, and had secured the reward of her merits in the attentions of a young titled ass, who, being much harassed by his parents and friends in consequence of his infatuation, had married her to assert what remained

of his will, and had shortly afterwards disappeared overboard, finally and irrevocably, during a yachting trip undertaken with somebody else's wife, with the determination, it was supposed, to confirm Samuel Weller's theory that nobody had ever yet seen a dead donkey.

Then Lady Woodroffe began to enjoy the fruits of her providence. She was very grateful to her husband for the safe position in which he had established her before disposing, in himself, of the only bar to their union. That remained her tenderest sentiment towards his memory. Her marriage had been nothing but a compromise with Fate—a politic acceptance of the refuge, or asylum, commonly open to those, the much admired and desired, who are above wishing to compromise themselves. In all the outcry against hereditary legislation, the ethical uses of the foolish lordling, considered in the light of endangered virtue's last resource, should not be forgotten.

Resourceful virtue, then, in the person of Miss May Flowerdew, had played her cards for good, and accident, as it chanced, had secured her the best possible. A courtesy title (as real, to nine-tenths of the world, as a patent), an ample if not riotous provision, were its visible expressions. The persistent withholding of the light of the parental countenance, as figured in the depressed lips and lowering brows of the Duke of Fetteris, did not affect her in the least. She preferred it to that supercilious appropriation of her which the birth of an heir would have been sure to render unavoidable. Being childless, she could enjoy her



independence untaxed of social restrictions and observances of a highly exclusive and mouldy character. At least they appeared so to her irreverent mind. At the same time she had no intention whatever of allowing herself to be reclaimed to her former caste and associates. All her labour of piety had proved but a treadmill toil in that case, ending by leaving her on the plane whence she had started. Not the highest, nor the lowest, nor the middle storeys of the social structure found favour, as a residence, in her emancipated eyes. She inclined rather to those broad warm eaves, under which the bright intelligences were wont to build their nests—little independent eyries woven of sun and mud. Thereabouts, she believed, lay the true asylum for such a flighty hybrid as herself. Her decent period of widowhood over, she set, cheerfully and decidedly, to shaping her destinies to that end. She would intrigue to be a queen-swallow there. Neither temperament nor training disposed her in the least to a life of self-abnegation. She had always shone, and she intended to shine still. How to win her crown was the question.

She applied to the resolving of that question a considerable fund of intelligence, native and acquired. A power of quick, sympathetic observation, a fine instinct for dramatic situation, a ready wit for repartee, natural graces of mind and voice and body, were all at her command, and all subject to a leavening quality of common-sense. That, perhaps, was her workable characteristic. It showed her those limitations in herself which she

must overstep if she would prosper—a tendency to undue emphasis and exuberance, little vulgarities of speech and behaviour, little tricks of her trade which she must consider as no longer negotiable in the refined intellectual altitudes to which she aspired. Generally, and in the course of her histrionic studies, she had got through a quite considerable amount of desultory reading. Her ambitions, in fact, had always soared above her condition. She had a retentive memory, and was possessed of that admirable form of curiosity which is the feminine term for education. If she had lived, for all her hitherto reputation was worth, in the present, it was because the past had offered her no practical means to a livelihood. But she had not been insensible to its attractions, or indifferent to the lessons it taught, more especially through the mouths of the notable among her own sex. Mohl, Recamier, Deffand, L'Espinasse, De Stäel, were names by no means without any suggestion to her. They gave her, in fact, the idea upon which she determined to proceed. The real historic reputations of women, she gathered, were founded not so much upon what they said about other people, as upon what they could make other people say about them. To be a tactful listener, in short, was to acquire a personal share in the memorabilia evoked of one's silent provocations.

There lay a good principle of conduct in itself, but she was conscious of her ability even to improve upon it. She would speak, to be sure, she must—but never unless she had something to say—a rare resolve in a woman, after all. Garrulity,

however sparkling, was apt to cheapen the value of any exclusive gems of thought itself might embody. The particular was lost in the general. She had plenty of reason, drawn from experience, to profit by that reflection. How was she quoted nowadays, if at all, but for the nonsense she had pattered? The atoms of trenchant wit which had punctuated that nonsense were forgotten, or had always been disregarded. Henceforth, then, her reputation should found itself upon a pregnant silence, persuasive, endearing, impressive, and delivering itself only with rare opportunism of the aphorism which told. She would seek to become a sort of latter-day *salonist*, combining in her one person the brilliancy of a Mohl with the seductive reticence of a Recamier.

She would seek, and she sought—with results neither completely satisfactory nor completely disappointing. Perhaps herself stood too prominently and patently in the foreground of her ambition to please the intellectuals; perhaps old habits of effrontery proved ineradicable; perhaps, after the human fashion, conservative mankind refused to recognise her in an unaccustomed rôle. In all professional matters, whether of art, literature, or the drama, to be once applauded for an achievement is to be condemned to its eternal diluted reproduction. She attracted people, but it was the glamour of the stage upon her which chiefly drew them. That is quite an astonishing lure to a huge diversity of characters. Your “leading lady” must accept the bad with the good, if she desires to fill her *salons*, and that was what Lady Woodroffe



had to do. Only the good were far fewer and shyer than she could have wished. The somebodies she was successful in capturing were never quite strong enough or numerous enough to leaven the mass of the next-to-nobodies. The big heavy fish, she found, were difficult to stir from their deep pools. They were wary, and suspicious of tinsel lures. Their proportion, in the drag-nettings, was generally as one to twenty or so of the small fry. Like Goldsmith's disappointed epicure, she had to eke out her venison pasty with boiled tripe and calves'-heads.

Things improved somewhat, of course, with the passage of time ; and a process of weeding, following upon experience and a sense of established security in her position, gave better results. Still, at this day, Lady Woodroffe could hardly be said to have realised her ambitions. Still her following represented but a modicum of value to a majority of cheap pretentiousness, which, though of a more respectable countenance than formerly, was perhaps by as many degrees duller.

She had resigned herself to the disproportion at last. It was only history—her history—repeating itself. The particular, it seemed, was eternally to be lost in the general. Life, for its tasty moments, was just a scatteration of prawns, suspended at long intervals in a huge insipid jelly of aspic.

She had travelled a good deal in the meanwhile, to the enlargement, at least, of her own mind ; and was now, in this August of our record, established in her country seat, Bryntyddyn, near the Dwyryth estuary in Merionethshire. The house was de-

lightfully situated on a green ledge of Moel Eidion, one of the seaward outposts of the great Snowdon group. It looked forth over a long bay of reclaimed land, once a tidal flat, which stretched, in shape like a salad-plate, to the rocks, four miles distant, of Caer Gollwyn, whose ruined castle tipped the outer crescent of noble hills which lay between. Westwards, the waters of Tremadoc Bay (which was just a goodish bite taken out of the greater Bay of Cardigan) contracted into the Traeth Bach, or Sandy-hook, which formed the shoulders of the Dwyryth estuary, and was vocal at tide-flow with a race not far removed from a bore. Straight into the sunset looked the windows of Bryntyddyn, their lovely picture of sea and plain framed in a mighty scroll of mountains, luminous, wonderful, imposing, subject to a thousand mystifications by sun and cloud.

Three miles away, under Caer Gollwyn, were the golf-links, pitched and rolled and shaped out of the natural sand-dunes, and famous in the annals of the craft. It was they which, many years before, had attracted Lord Woodroffe, a notable golfer, to the place. Bryntyddyn (signifying "Hill-farm") had been just a substantial bothy, before he had purchased it to form the nucleus of a golfing seat. It stood on the lower slopes of Moel Eidion—otherwise the "Bald-headed Cow"—whose stony pate, like a friar's tonsure, stuck prominent above the thick-cloaking foliage with which two-thirds of the hill were covered. The long one-storeyed, ark-shaped building rested very snugly on a green terrace, which let itself down by way of other green ledges

to the woodside fifty yards below. It was built of grey-and-tawny flint-stone in irregular blocks, and roofed with the rare red-streaked slates which come from the quarries of Llanberis. A verandah ran the length of it in front, and roses were cultivated everywhere, on walls and turf, though approaching at the present time the scanty autumn of their flowering. Acres of this south-westward face of the hill belonged to the viscount's widow—truly a pleasant dower-house for the daughter of—but no tales, if you please.

Lady Woodroffe was at this date a *dégagée* woman of thirty, in the bright aftermath of her adolescence. She was tall and slender, a very piquante brunette, with a saucy nose, rather small features, and dark sagacious eyes. What it must have cost her, so constituted, to subdue in herself the natural *flux-de-bouche*, Heaven only knew. In other particulars she gave her instincts rein—ate and drank what she fancied, dressed like her fashionable sisters, scorned all the affected livery of “mind.” Only upon the small and meretricious, she considered, was imposed the vesture of self-advertisement. She would not be her own sandwich-boards in a divided skirt.

She had not, I think, once really thought during these years of marrying again. She had already and deliberately estimated the value, to such as she, of the sporting contract, and had realised handsomely upon her estimate. What possible better could it offer her? Love, and sentiment, and the ethereal unities! She had played with the terms so constantly of old that it had become a



habit with her to make game of them. Her common-sense, moreover, had not rusted with disuse. She enjoyed, she reflected, all, or nearly all, the robust benefits of matrimony without its complaints. If the exception was a real one, it only affected her occasionally, like a headache or toothache—ills to which the happiest constitution was subject.

And yet there were moments, strange, tremulous, wistful, when all her life, her gifts, her ambitions, seemed committed to a dreary unfulfilment. Something, that some one had once said or written to her, hung in her memory like a dead face. It was worth remembering, in these days of the mad revolt by women against maternity, inevitable consequence of as mad a lust for change and movement. "The secret of perpetual youth" had been its burden, "is a family secret. No one can possess it but the parent who knows how to make a baby of himself, so that he may grow up afresh with each of his children in succession. There is no such other dear delight in life as to watch the pretty blossoming of mind and speech in these slips of one's grafting—their first pouting essays, the difficult syllables edging out crooked on their little milky tongues, the gradual shaping and connecting of words, the comical caught tones and accents, and all moulded on lips that have hardly any shape of their own but loveliness. These are pleasures of a purity and unselfishness with which no others can compare. To see a little curly-headed babeling, one's own, of two or so, pondering, with wide uplifted eyes and open dewy mouth, some novel problem of an as-

tonishing existence, is to recover one's seasonable belief in God.

“There is a legend that when the golden age was ended and Olympus had withdrawn, one sweet immortal tarried on the earth. Her name is Wonder, I believe, and day by day we seek to hunt her to death or exile. What is gained by the intimate dissection and analysis of things but disillusionment? Preserve us our eternal Wonder, little child, and through the mouth of thee shall this ugly nightmare of human omniscience come at last to hear its own condemnation!”

But such reflections were for her sentimental moments. For the most part, her *figure* stood paramount in Lady Woodroffe's consideration. Maternity was dreadfully inimical to a woman's keeping one or cutting one in the world.

## CHAPTER VIII

It was early understood, without any formal agreement, that the partnership between Herne the Hunter and Robin Goodfellow was to be a partnership of ideas. No facts were to obtrude themselves, save in so far as they were conformable to the existing romance of circumstance. The two were casual comrades hob-nobbing by the way, and all references to the past were tacitly eschewed between them. The recognised sophism was that it was the parrot, not the boy, who was the fugitive from tyranny.

The boy understood this quite clearly. He seemed to comprehend that his sojourn with a delightful companion in a delightful country was entirely conditional on his quiet surrender to the situation. He discovered, to be sure, no embarrassment in the matter. The revelation of his most quaint and original little mind was a perpetual delight to his friend. He found the small creature to be one, in embryo, of those rare anomalies, the pugnacious dreamers. He reminded him somehow of Shelley—a child of ghostly light which could blaze up redly in the face of injustice. He was as full of fancies as himself, moreover—a story-brooder and story-teller by nature—together as sympathetic a wayfellow as accident could have brought him.



The two were greatly taken with Caer Gollwyn, with its one street which seemed quarried out of the high bed rock, and its massive brown old castle, which, sitting squat on its own blunt pinnacle of the hill, overlooked, from a height of two hundred feet, the golf-links, and the wide Morfa, or fen, of Gollwyn stretching away along the Dwyryth estuary to the distant mountains. The place pleased them in all but its human aspects. It bristled too thickly with cleeks and brassies and niblicks to give them a sense of security. To Herne it savoured over much of a social outpost; to nervous Robin its thronging eyes were eternally suggestive of recognition and retribution. Not that the boy had so many acquaintances as to make his identification by one less conceivably remote than was the spot itself. But the haunted mind sees its spectre in every dusky corner. Otherwise, each present detail of his life was a strange and exquisite revelation to him. He had forgotten in these dismal years what the world could be like.

To escape this contact with their fellows, the comrades spent the most of their time exploring the neighbouring country. On these occasions the green parrot was generally, from motives of policy as well as of convenience, left behind. The landlord of their modest lodgings looked after him, as he looked after their interests generally. Taffy, they found, all proverbs despite, did not cheat. He was a very manly independent fellow, neither truckling nor insolent, and charged them just what he had undertaken to charge, and not a penny less.

The country they explored was, in truth, a

magnificent education in independence. It seemed impossible to be small there. The air was so free, the mountains so noble, the torrents so unenslaved. They neither gushed nor brawled ; they poured on their way with strong melodious voices singing liberty. Broadly speaking, everything was attuned to a harmony of greys, shadowing into the deepest greens of verdure. The houses, the boundary walls, the roads, the gate-posts appeared so many shapely growths of the grey hills which produced them. The cattle were inky-black ; the very smoke of the locomotives, stone-grey charged with snow-white patches of steam, accommodated itself, in defiance of hygienics, to the prevailing "composition." And, through all the high-flung prospect far and wide, shone out, in gleamings of the sun, rare mystic streaks of gold and emerald and softest azure, mapped with threads of water-courses like the tracks of snails.

Herne and Robin would wander deep and far among the hills ; chatting fitfully ; sometimes exchanging stories ; often proceeding for miles in a luminous silence. Once or twice they sunk in bogs ; once or twice lost themselves in perilous situations, when the mountain mists rolled down upon them toiling entangled in gloomy labyrinths of the rocks. But the spirit of romance preserved them ; the bulls they encountered were "good" bulls ; there was always some distant taper to cheer their waste "with hospitable ray." Their talk, to the orthodox mind, would have appeared the most inconsequent possible. It turned almost entirely upon chance suggestion. Thus, when

seated once in the notch of a mountain pass munching their sandwiches, a circling hawk dropped far away among the bushes.

“Would you like to be a bird?” says Herne.

“No,” says Robin.

“Why not?”

“Because then I could look down on the clouds and trees, and know what was happening on the other side.”

“And you don’t want to know?”

“No; I like to wonder about it best.”

“H’m! ‘When Science from Creation’s face!  
Exactly. Dear boy. Now what of all things but yourself *would* you like to be, if you might?”

“You, of course.”

He meant it with all his heart. There was no such wonderful being in the world as Herne.

Herne laughed. “O, these green magnifying lenses called Robin’s eyes! I am quite a little person, Robin, if you only knew, and painfully conscious of my stature. And yet—and yet, it’s funny; but I often find myself at odds with the opinions of the giants; and, moreover, am as positive on these occasions that I am right and that they are wrong as I am that black isn’t white.”

He may have had in his mind, perhaps, a great churchman’s surrender to idolatry; a great statesman’s recorded consecration of certain books which *he* thought clap-trap.

“I suppose,” said he, “that truth, like everything else, is relative. Philip the Second thought he was serving it when he burnt and tore ten thousand people into pieces because they differed from



him as to the value of a symbol. Is he in the melting-pot himself ever since? I don't see why—any more than why Mr. Whatsisname, in an age of business puffery, should be damned for advertising his particular brand of Christian science as the only genuine brand of Christian science on the market. It's just a question of my faith and your faith; only my faith, you know, is always the profitable one."

The strange quiet boy smiled. Herne, in his philosophic communings, never troubled to adapt his views and phrases to a smaller understanding. He had little need to, in fact. The precocious intelligence of the child reached him somehow through his cloudiest flights of fancy.

"How funny it would be," said thoughtful Robin, "if all advertisements spoke the real exact truth."

"Wouldn't it!" said Herne.

"Everything advertised, you know," said Robin, "is the best of its kind; and that isn't possible, is it?"

Herne chuckled delightedly.

"Of course not. Let's imagine one or two as they ought to be. Listen to this, now: 'All (except M. Talleyrand, of course, Mr. Robin) are agreed that it is necessary for a man to live. If you want *me* to live, and to live well, buy my Hirsute Tabloids, the purchase of which will do *you* no harm, and *me* a heap of good.' Now for your turn."

Robin considered.

"'Strider's boots,'" said he, "'should not blister the heels. They are not meant to.'"

“Exactly!” cried Herne, smacking his hand down on his knee. “They are not meant to, of course. Now, me: ‘Dear sir—I send this unsolicited testimonial, *re* your Anti-Cadaverine, for which you ask me; and am hereby pleased to certify that I have found your honorarium for the same very satisfying. Yours, the Living-Skeleton.’”

Robin was ready with his next.

“‘Roadster’s bicycles,’” he said, “‘are the best it is possible to make at the price; and that is the best we can say for them.’”

Herne rolled on the grass, and kicked up his legs, clapping his boots together.

“I give you the palm, Robin,” he said, coming erect; and popped a whole sandwich into his mouth.

“What would *you* like to be, Herne, if you might?” asked the boy.

Herne gulped, and answered at once and gravely.

“There can be no question whatever, my boy, with a dyspeptic human. One of those sea-creatures, of course, that, when they feel indisposed, throw away their stomachs and get another.”

He crowed.

“Talk of evolution to the higher forms! Think of Vitellius, and the rest of the gluttons! What wouldn’t they have given for such a power!”

Sometimes they went down to the shore, a mile away over the sand-dunes, and hired, at twopence a head, a bathing-machine (which was just a little crate of wood stretched round with dirty linen, and very like a Punch’s show without the ornamental top and stage), and made a pretence of surf-swimming in the breakers. It was certainly a

shallow pretence, judged by the depth of the water, which a furlong out only came up to Robin's shoulders ; but, with imagination at command, facts are easily convertible into fiction.

Afterwards, salt and humid, they would wander over the league-long sands, and pick up things. The first time it was a little oblong leathery bag, with spines at its four corners.

"I know that," said Robin, excogitating a dim remembrance of pre-logarithmic times. "It is a skate's egg."

Herne, handling the little slimy pouch, shook his head reproachfully. "I wonder at you, Robin," he said.

"Isn't it, Herne ?" asked the boy surprised.

"I wonder at you," repeated Herne. "But perhaps circumstances, my poor child, have blunted your memory. This is a mermaid's purse, Robin."

The boy understood at once, and smiled.

"Tell me about it, Herne," he said coaxingly.

The two sat down on the sands. Herne pointed to a litter of tiny pink and opal shells at their feet.

"All its pretty treasures scattered, too," said he. "I wonder how she lost it. Shells, you must know, Robin, were the first and primitive tokens used in barter among men. Why was that ? Because we all came up from the sea originally. Don't pretend that you have forgotten your fins."

Then he soliloquised mournfully :

"When did the spirit of name-poetry fly from our commercial shores ? Don't tell me that it never existed among us less unvitally than now—that Dick Whittington, even, was as prosaic a Lord



Mayor as—I can't remember his name. When did forget-me-nots first come to be called myosotis, and virgin's-bower clematis, and the darling gipsy-rose scabious (they call water-lilies water-roses here, by the way, Robin)? We are quite incapable nowadays of such endearing terms of fancy. What flower is ever christened but after the hideous patronymic of its botanical godfather or mother? We hunt 'bugs' instead of butterflies; a 'hop' elegantly expresses our ideas of the poetry of motion; we are 'cute' instead of being wise. It is the age of the survival of the 'slimmest.' The fairy godmothers all migrated, I suppose, when machinery first came to usurp the proper business of our hands. What caressing inspiration could possibly find itself in an era of mechanical products and automatic spy-glasses? 'The music of the moon' no longer 'sleeps in the plain eggs of the nightingale.' The moon herself, we know, is a burst and mute old drum; and, as to eggs, we manufacture them artificially, and shall shortly, no doubt, be in a position to hatch bird-organs out of maize-paste and lard and lime. O, bird-music and word-music! How a poor century or two have served to discredit your choirs!"

He checked himself, and looked at his companion with a wry face.

"I was thinking of things, Robin," said he, "and speaking my thoughts aloud. That is a bad habit. Now you shall invent a little moral tale for me, to illustrate its evil."

"What, Herne—of speaking one's thoughts aloud?"

“Yes ; exactly.”

Robin took time to consider. Presently he began :

“Once there was a king who had an only child. Her name was Snow. She was very white and cold, but so very beautiful. Her father loved her greatly. He was always afraid of the time when she would melt and run away from him ; so what must he do but decree that any suitor for her hand must retire for good the moment she should show any sign of melting to him, and that the only chance for one to be selected was in proving himself colder than she. Now many, attracted by her beautiful loveliness, came to woo ; and they would speak like ice for a little ; but presently the fire of their great admiration would make itself seen through their eyes, and the princess would show signs of melting to them, and then they must go at once, lest she should end by running away. But on a certain day there arrived one the most presumptuous, seeing that he made no pretence of coldness whatever. He had summer in his eyes, and his hair was like sunrise on the rippling water, and a dove from the royal cote had alighted on his shoulder. And his name was Darling. And the moment he passed smiling through the door, the princess began to melt to him, and the king shrieked out to them to take him away.

“Now Darling, in that one glimpse he had had of the princess, was smitten half to death with love of her loveliness ; and he took his dismissal so greatly to heart that what did he do but retire to a thorny waste, where he made his abode deep

down in a fissure of the rocks, under a mighty tree, and brooded all day and dreamt all night about the princess."

The narrator paused a moment.

"What did he live on in the waste?" asked Herne.

"He lived," said Robin authoritatively, "partly on stax, a bitter herb, and partly on eulium, a sort of fruity gum, like raspberries, which exuded from the trees."

"Very well," said Herne. "Go on."

"One day," said Robin, "while entombed in his cavern (which only he knew the secret of the way into), he was surprised by seeing a little hoop of light come bouncing and rolling through the rocky fissure above his head. He took it up; and, lo! it was a ring of surpassing value, which, it appeared, somebody had dropped. He climbed cautiously to the opening, and peeped out—and there was the king himself, who, it chanced, had come riding by that way alone; and taking off his ring to kiss it, which he was wont to do in lonely places when feeling lost, the jewel had escaped from his fingers, and rolled into what looked like a bottomless chasm. Then the king got off his horse, breathless like one struck, and he looked into the darkness of the fissure, and stood up again, beating his hands to his brow. 'My sweet dead wife's betrothal ring,' he cried, 'which she took from her finger, bidding me return it to her in heaven! Our daughter's hand to the man, hot or cold, who shall find and restore it to me!' And he rode on his way, bowed down with extraordinary grief; but



the hermit was rejoicing in his cavern, knowing that a king's word is his bond."

The narrator stopped again. The other presently urged him on.

"Well," said Herne. "Darling came to claim the king's word, I suppose; and the beautiful princess melted, like Undine, into a melodious rivulet about her love's feet?"

Robin shook his head.

"No," he said. "Because the ring proved to be an enchanted ring; and, just as she was melting, Darling thought to slip it on her finger; and instantly there she was, blushing like an almond tree, and all the coldness gone. And a sweet little baby, just like the dead mother, was lying in her arms between them."

Herne rubbed his forehead.

"So that is all the moral you can give me," he said; and sighed, with a half comical, half moved expression. "I have spoken my thoughts aloud, too, for a good many years now, and yet—well, they have produced you, at least, you queer little man-baby."

He rose, and stretched; then stood for some minutes tracing patterns in the sand with his stick.

"What are they?" asked curious Robin.

"O, nothing!" answered Herne, "just fancies."

"They look like a monogram."

"Do they? The next tide will wash them away anyhow. Come along; we must be stretching our legs for the hills."

## CHAPTER IX

ONCE, a week after their arrival, they were belated in the pouring rain ; and thereby came to hang a tale. They had broken down from the hills, wet to the waist, and saw before them the lights of the little village of Tal-y-sarn, which lies on the main road to Stonyfalls, a mile or two from the neck of the estuary on the Caer Gollwyn side. Tramps though they were, they could not face, in their sopped and famished condition, the weary four miles of road which lay between them and home ; so they put up for the night at “ The Ship Aground,” a little village tavern, whose unpretentious front gave small promise of the kindly entertainment they were to find within. They sat in blankets while their supper was preparing, and afterwards, surfeited and smiling, went to bed and slept the sleep of the mighty.

The next morning the rain had all drifted by, and a tranquil sun was glowing in a world of mists. Such are the caprices of that mountain climate. They found their clothes dried and aired, ate a huge breakfast of “ sassises ”—as the little waiting-maid, Annie, or Onnee, called the homely saveloy—and inquired of her about the neighbourhood, and as to who lived in the big house on the hill beyond, whose lights, blinking through the

rain, they had passed near on their descent overnight.

“Inteet and I do not know,” said the maidling in her soft little voice. She knew well enough, only she could not understand their question, which she hastened shyly to send her mistress to answer. The comely landlady had the English, and could comprehend as well as speak it. She told them that the place “Bryntyddyn” belonged to the Dowager Lady Woodroffe, who was at present entertaining a mixed house-party there. Herne, it seems, had heard of the viscountess, and hinted his knowledge misleadingly.

“Inteet,” said the good woman, “and she will have friends of what sort soever, both old and new, and the worst, it is said, will have an equal claim on her leddyship with the best.”

The answer was ambiguous ; but Herne chose handsomely to construe it into a compliment. However, he not only disclaimed all acquaintance with the mistress of “Bryntyddyn,” but deprecated vehemently the mere suggestion of his seeking to include himself in any social gathering of his fellows. Estrangement and seclusion, rather, were what he and his young friend desired, he explained—a woodland hermitage ; fragrant intercourse with birds and beasts ; of communication with their kind no more than was necessary to the preservation of their bodily and mental sanity.

The landlady laughed. She supposed him to be jesting, or just temporarily peculiar. These foreigners, as the Welsh regard the English, were wont to eccentricities.



If those were his desires, she said, he need only walk over the hills to Maes-y-Myrddyn to realise them to the full. There were ruin and solitude and loneliness as complete as melancholy could wish.

Herne pricked up his ears, interested at once, What was this Maes-y-Myrddyn ?

It signified The Ruin-in-the-fields, it appeared ; but the title was unexplanatory, or out of date. The house, as a matter of fact, lay within woods, and was reputed to be haunted. It had not been inhabited for years, and was dropping piecemeal where it stood. It had been a famous house in its time, too, but there was an uncomfortable story connected with it, which had dated the end of its living history. Many years ago, as far back as the memory of the "oldest native" could reach, the thing had befallen which had made it accurst, and accurst it had remained ever since. The grounds in which it stood were, it appeared, of considerable extent ; but they, too, had shared the ban. They comprised wood and pasture and pleasaunce, all now neglected and overgrown. The poachers had long ago killed off the last head of game ; the gardens had reverted to nature ; uncanny things rustled in the brakes, or slipped noiselessly up the tree-trunks. The place was generally avoided of humankind—O yes ! it was the very retreat for a hermit whose misanthropy was proof against ghosts.

She told the story. Herne could not give it me in her words ; but the gist of it, in his, ran as follows :

“Many souls are subject to moments of devilish perversity, when something prompts them—against their wills, it would appear—to utterances of an inhuman and self-destroying wickedness. Such an aberration, it seems, took the dark Squire Gwynfren when he was returning from chapel one evening with his young wife Nesta. He had come home from abroad to marry her, and they were now man and wife some six months. As they walked, remote and solitary, up the darkening hill-lane, a profound silence reigned between and about them. Not a rabbit rustled in the grass; not a bird twittered from the trees; their footfalls sounded on the turf like the beating of their own hearts. And then, hollow and sudden, he spoke :

“‘Stealthy and deadly are the evil spirits who creep upon men’s tracks, who follow to study and absorb them, that they may take their shapes and speak plausibly through their mouths by-and-by.’

“His wife’s hand fell from his arm. She turned and looked into his face. It seemed strange to her. ‘Gwynfren!’ she muttered faintly.

“She was a frail and nervous girl, impressionable, easily terrified, and he knew it. It was that knowledge which the fiend in him was prompting him to abuse.

“‘Supposing,’ he said, ‘that I were suddenly to reveal to you that the thing, walking here by your side, penetrating your confidences, was not your husband at all, but an evil spirit who had taken his appearance, and stolen into his place, in order to ruin your soul?’

“He knew what he was saying, and he said it, in

that mischievous instant, deliberately. She hurried a few paces forward, and stopped, trembling. He was regaining himself by then, and, with a loud laugh, overtook and caught her into his arms. She gave a dreadful scream, and fell fainting.

“Now he recognised what he had done, and sought with frantic endearments to remedy it. He bore her to the hall, watched in agony by her side, greeted with ecstasy her return to consciousness. When it came, he beheld only horror and estrangement in her eyes—no recognition whatever of the love, the intimacy, the confidence which had welded their hearts in one. She feared his neighbourhood ; she loathed his presence ; from that day to the end he was nothing to her but a fiend masquerading in the habit of a dear dead memory. She bore him a fearful child, and died.

“But the man himself had changed in the meanwhile. The remorse in him had given way to a moody resentment, and that to passions unnameable. Truly the devil he had idly entertained had come to usurp him in perpetuity. He cursed the God who could visit the sin of a moment with a retribution so merciless and far-reaching. One day he disappeared with the horror that was his son, and neither was ever seen again. The estate fell into litigation ; the law drained and threw it aside ; for long years now it had remained an unprofitable waste, nominally nursed by a factor for the benefit of a distant branch of the old family.”

Such, more or less, was the landlady's tale as interpreted, and possibly adorned, by Herne. It had the effect of arousing his curiosity to a pitch



that was irresistible. After breakfast, he and Robin started on a tour of investigation.

It was a day perfectly windless and still. A light mist hung in the trees, and the soaked ground gave back no echo. So quiet was it that the bark of a shepherd's dog could be heard a mile away.

They took the *Caer Gollwyn* road, as directed ; skirted *Moel Eidion*, and, in the notch which divided that hill from the next, found the little abandoned by-way which was to lead them to their destination. It was a mere cloistered lane of foliage, scarce perceptible from the road, and ended, a hundred yards down, at a broken gate and stile. Passing these, they found themselves on a wild slope of once pasture-land, thickly thronged with trees, and affording, as they mounted it, a magnificent prospect, broken into a hundred leafy vistas, of the surrounding country. A faint but unmistakable track led under their feet. It had been a drive once, and so substantially laid, it appeared, that generations of encumbering grass and brier had been unable to obliterate it. Always discernible, it went writhing obliquely up the hillside, and presently, at near a mile from its beginning, ran under some tall and slender iron gates which appeared suddenly out of a massed bank of foliage.

Herne and Robin stopped, with an exclamation from the man, half awe, half delight. A profound silence reigned over the place. They looked between the bars of the gate, and saw a long narrow drive, straight as a dyke, running before them between high hedges of boxwood. The floor of this drive was green with moss from end to end.

Right and left broad belts of thicket, tangled with fruit trees long reclaimed to the wilderness, enclosed the whole length of the alley, giving it the appearance of a channel deep-cut in the thick fleece of the hillside. Moving with an instinctive softness now, as if in the neighbourhood of some ghostly sanctuary, Herne pressed against the ruined gates. They opened reluctantly, and fell behind the intruders with a peevish clang. Up the long drive they went, stepping as if on velvet. Not a sound or movement of any sort greeted their passage. The boy slid his hand into his companion's.

Suddenly they came out into an open space, set round with an amphitheatre of motionless trees; and there before their eyes was Maes-y-Myrddyn, the house of utter desolation.

It stood above them in a great recess quarried out of the living rock-side. So close were its rearward walls to their mother stone that the area between was bridged with many brambles, which had encroached down to the lip of the chasm and over it. A dreary prospect always, one would have thought, from the back windows, of which there were several; a strange situation to choose for a dwelling of such prosperous dimensions. But it was grown, they had been told, from a little seed—a mere hill-man's farm rooted on the mountain-side. It had grown there, and lived and died, too, by the token of its sightless windows.

It was a widish, one-storeyed building of the Jacobean period, with shallow projecting wings, and a low-browed stone-tiled roof, thick with ghostly attics. It had many long windows on its

front—some, of the old farm time, with stone mullions ; but one and all they were shuttered in with soiled white panels behind the broken glass, giving them the effect of dead eyes in an evil face. The chimneys were crumbling ; the roof, embroidered with archipelagos of moss, gaped in many places ; the front-door, green with age, showed a splintered panel, whose very edges were black with soak and rot. Everywhere and on all sides showed desolation and decay. A brooding house, indeed, for the voiceless horrors which long ago had locked its doors and barred its windows upon their own most wicked secrets.

Yet it must have been a glad enough residence once upon a time—for those, at least, whose souls were attuned to solitude. It lay in the very silence of the hills, thickly embowered and embraced about by Nature. Malignant man alone had wrought its present atmosphere of fear. There were not lacking many tokens of the beauties which must have existed there in ancient days—the boxwood alley itself, fair-laid through flowering orchards ; the good walled garden, lying a step lower down the hill ; the grassy plats and borders set all about the terrace on which the house was built, and to which a shallow flight of stone steps, shattered now and grass-grown, led from the lower level of the drive on which the friends stood. In the time before the shutting-in of the trees, in the time before the gross weeds and strong burdocks had come to conquer and overrun its lawns and gardens, the seat must have been a pleasant one, remote and quiet, with a fair prospect from its windows.



Those blind dead eyes ! It was they which in the end sent Herne and Robin onwards down the hill, with stealthy glances, not to be confessed, over their shoulders, and prickles in their manly legs.

Yet they would not run ; but, when they had descended some score paces and turned a corner, and the eyes were no longer following them, they found the resolution to sit upon a fallen tree, and even to laugh a little, though certainly Herne's breath, for one, came short out of him.

" Well ? " he said presently, and looked Robin square in the face.

" I don't mind," answered the boy, " so long as you are with me."

" It was the windows," said Herne.

" Yes, it was the windows," said the boy. " I was thinking if one should lift its lid ever so little and slowly ! "

Herne humped himself, his hands flat between his knees, and drew in his breath softly. Then he rose all at once.

" This is nonsense," he said. " We must be masters, not slaves, to our imaginations, you and I. It was that woman's story. Before long we'll come again, Robin, and see if we can get in."

" If we brought Ferdinand," said Robin, " it wouldn't all matter a bit."

" O, wouldn't it ? Why ? "

" He knows everything, Herne, and is afraid of nothing. He's been like my guardian-angel in the dark nights."

Herne looked down quickly at the little solemn soul, and then away. What tragi-comedy was

implied in those odd words ? The dark suffering nights, to be sure, with *things* on the staircase, and Ferdinand above with his flaming sword !

The drive dropped down crookedly among trees, and they followed it. They passed the walled garden, a tottering dove-cote, some dismantled outbuildings, decayed as to their roofs, but with their stone walls still unperished and enduring. And then suddenly a sound of moving waters drew upon their ears, and, lo ! in a luminous gully of the hills close by stood a little mill-house, with a locked and weed-choked wheel at its side, and the smallest of torrents hurrying under the broken floats.

It was the prettiest picture imaginable, like a scene in a melodrama. The wheel sparkled ; the water fell ; the little house, nestled within the shadow of a clump of trees, was mottled with “patines of bright gold.” For the netted branches made a pleasant lattice to it, letting in the day, and looking out on an open country of valleys and pastures, all of a vivid emerald, which lay beyond. Nor was this the best ; for, a short stone’s-throw below them, they saw the drive emerge upon a tiny hamlet, clustered out in the sunlight, and owning actually a green and a little pond with rails and ducks. The pastoral revelation seemed to take on the instant half their terrors from the upper silences.

The two stood looking at the mill-cot by the water. It had an almost new slate roof, and appeared to be in excellent repair, as if recently inhabited. Something in its aspect—the open door

and blindless windows, perhaps—seemed to signify that it was empty at the moment.

“I am going to explore,” said Herne.

A bridge, so small that it was only a single plank, led across the stream. They passed over it, and entered the hermitage. By what they could make out, it had once been a pumping station to supply the house above with water, but had since been converted into an independent lodge. It had four little living rooms, empty and dusty, and a loft overhead. The rooms looked out, two on the tumbling water, two into the sun-embroidered coppice, which gave, on its farther side, upon falling slopes of green. It suggested the snuggest retreat.

Herne turned to the boy. For days he had been concerned for him, and dissatisfied for himself. It was true that no hint of pursuit had reached them so far ; but one had never known what the next day might bring to them, sojourning confessed and unashamed in public places. He had no conscience in the matter ; or at least he was all conscience, only of the unorthodox kind, and that meant a world of difference to the world. He had no desire left for himself but to cherish and protect this little fugitive from tyranny, whom his soul had learned to love.

“Would you like to come and live here, if we might ? ” he asked.

The boy pressed up to him, putting his cheek against his hand.

“O yes, Herne ! ” he said.

The man smiled down, very sweetly and kindly.



“No fear of—you know—that above?”

“No, I think not—no, I am sure I haven’t, with you, and Ferdinand, and—and—those dear little cottages down there.”

Herne mused.

“We know nothing about it all; but supposing—just if we could—it seems a sort of Providence—and cheap, I’ll be bound.”

He seized the boy’s hand suddenly, and led him across the bridge and down the hill. Once below the trees, the loveliest prospect of rolling hills and valleys opened before their sight.

“O, heavenly!” said Herne; and he went and spoke to a handsome black-eyed young man, of the dark Cymric type, who at that moment came towards the little pond with a pail in his hand.

Robin could hardly gather the drift of their conversation, as the young man talked like a foreigner, showing a gleam of white teeth; but presently Herne turned to him, with a satisfied face.

“It seems promising,” he said. “The factor’s agent, or caretaker, has lived there until recently. He was an old man, and is dead. Nobody as yet has been appointed in his stead. There is no real need of a watchman, says our friend significantly. The place watches itself. Now I am going to make you a proposal, which you must consider reasonably. The factor lives in *Caer Gollwyn*, and I am going to see him; and, if we can come to terms, I shall take that little house, and furnish it, and we will live there. But these things mean time—some days, probably; and in the meanwhile

I suggest leaving you here for safety in charge of our friend, who is very willing to lodge and board you ; and when I have got the house ready, I will come and fetch you to it. Will you agree to that, Robin ? ”

The boy had a fight with himself. Presently he looked up.

“ Yes, Herne,” he said. “ You—you won’t leave me altogether ? ”

The passionate cry would out. He couldn’t help it, for all his resolution. Herne knelt down, and put his arm about him.

“ For shame, Robin,” he said. “ Now remember what I once told you. Ferdinand, my child, is their clue to you ; but, if they are looking at all, they are not looking for a *man* with a talking parrot.”

## CHAPTER X

IT is quite an overworn satire at this day to remark upon somebody as distinguished in never having written a book. It would be more to the point to acclaim the author who has never been able to find a publisher for his lucubrations. That is the real distinction in an age which would appear to be the age of the automatic printing of commonplace. To be so supremely silly, or, perhaps, so supremely wise, that no publisher could be found to risk his imprimatur on one's productions, would surely establish one's claim to a very exclusive order of merit. Only, in the former instance, the "trade" would not appear to have fixed upon any statute of limitations. From the unplumbed sea of inanities the unpublishable one does not as yet seem to have been dredged up. At the other end, of course, the distinguished are more numerous. One has only to emerge from the commonplace a moment to discover quite a company of manuscript poets and essayists and romancers gnawing its nails aloof—"hearts pregnant with celestial fire" too, very possibly. But that is no good to them. It is the worldly stuff that is wanted.

The age, then, being the age of universal printing, may have accounted for the "literary" constitution of Lady Woodroffe's present house-party.



Its members, for the brighter part, had been selected, or netted, according to their capacity for making their hostess shine by reflection; for the duller, because flattered small minds make flattering reporters.

Everybody there had published something, not excepting the mistress of "Bryntyddyn" herself. Her ladyship's "Random Reminiscences"—produced with a collaborator, who was also her unqualified, almost her fatuous, admirer—had been the "literary sensation" of a few seasons back. All the leading dailies had hurried to give them a column apiece on the morning of publication. That the brand (to the discriminating) of the usual theatrical biography, or autobiography, was plain on them, counted for nothing with editors who knew their business. When popular celebrities elect to confess themselves, justification for their confessions is not to be sought in literary excellencies of wit and wisdom, but in the popular demand which governs circulations. And, after all, Lady Woodroffe had had a great deal to say, which, if said a thousand times before by other people about other people, had never hitherto been said by herself about herself—at least in print. And she had not once been guilty of referring to past acquaintances as "my dear old friend," A. or B. or C., or of attributing to humour the ebullitions of rather vulgar animal spirits. Yet, curiously enough, she was not vain of her solitary appearance in print—which had happened early in her widowhood—and had grown shy of references to it.

Hector Leveson was her "big fish" on the present

occasion. He was an author and critic of fame—strong and just ; of catholic appreciations ; spacious and generous in mind and body. He liked good writing, good living, good enterprise, and good art. The worst that his soul abhorred was complacent mediocrity. He was a man of fifty, large in the face and waist, with a tendency to ease his waistcoat buttons towards the end of dinner. His eyes were blue ; his thin hair fluffed up on his head ; he had a deep vibrant voice, and a sparse sandy beard scattered over a double chin. His reviews were the man, penetrating, uncompromising—technically, models of artistic workmanship. His poems—though often cited for anomalies—were he no less—tuneful and passionate lyrics, speaking the inherent tenderness of a manifold nature. He spoke from conviction, and sang from sentiment—a proper critic of his inches.

Opposed to him, on a lower plane, was Currie, of *The Weekly Censor*, a caustic, ichneumonid-looking man of an older age, always hungry and always dyspeptic. He was a Conservative and critic of the Procrustean order, fitting, and very savagely, all things and ideas to the prototypal measure. He thought the age vile, and expressed his opinion of it in destructive terms, dear to the traditions of his paper. A review by him at his most violent has been likened unkindly to the passage of a road-hog—a whirl, a hoot, a cloud of dust, a mutilated pedestrian, and a stench of decomposed gases. His equipment as a scholar was not faultless. Occasionally, like Homer, he would nod ; as when he dismissed, in a few words, a late

posthumous reprint of Thomson's "City of Dreadful Night" as a new poem by one of the decadent school, or, in the midst of a pompous diatribe against historical inaccuracy, himself muddled up Nelson's Ferdinand of Sicily with "Rè Bomba," the destroyer of Messina. But for the most part he was content with putting up his age back to back with "the age of the giants," and demonstrating the insolence of any politician in being shorter than Beaconsfield, and of any author in not coming up to Thackeray's shoulders.

Shipley, the popular writer of "sensation novels," may be cited as next in importance. He was a pleasant creature without any self-delusions, fat, jolly, and prosperous. He dictated his fiction into phonographs, but in his truths was perfectly outspoken; frankly "boomed" himself; reflected jocundly how every word he wrote was worth a threepenny bit; sometimes amused himself by correcting his otherwise flawless proofs by the dictionary, in order, as he said, to give the other words a living.

These, and possibly the rising young barrister, Mr. Perceval Acton, who had written a "Digest of Grant and Livery," may be accounted the principals of the party. The smaller literary fry included an honourable Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, a Reverend Mr. Batten, and one or two inconsiderable young ladies and gentlemen who all had this in common, that they had exposed themselves in print and were not ashamed of it—possibly because not one of them had as yet eaten of the tree of knowledge. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto was a



shrewd *divorcée* of thirty-seven, who, while trading, literally, upon her title (she took secret commissions from some fashionable costumiers, perfumers, and furriers for recommending them to her aristocratic acquaintances), was very scornful of rank, *per se*, and very particular in her claims to its privileges. She reviewed fiction for the *Happy Despatch*, and had a way of becoming personal when in high spirits. The Reverend Mr. Batten suffered a good deal from her flippancy, as it was his habit to take himself as an author with considerable seriousness. He was the gentleman who, having produced a version of the Psalms in rational prose, was now at work on a metrical rendering of "The Pilgrim's Progress."

Even Mrs. Owen Merrivale, the pretty *mystérieuse* from Venice, and our last to be quoted, had published her "Impressions"—chiefly of St. Mark's and the Adriatic—which had appeared—Mrs. Merrivale being a lady of fortune—in a popular magazine. They had, nevertheless, been written with a certain sparkle, and feeling for the *not juste*, for which, the observant did not fail to notice, the authoress had gone to school to the little-admired stylist John Wisdom. But to those desirable small hands much was to be forgiven; and John, even, like Lady Woodroffe, had shone for the moment by reflection. While the series lasted his sales had run up by at least a volume or two.

Of such was the house-party compounded, and to each and all was Lady Woodroffe the tactful *salonist*. She fed them royally; flattered them judiciously; engendered of her own outspokenness a general atmosphere of freedom, which did not

often degenerate into self-confident loudness, and provided what amusements she could in the shape of fishing, golfing, mountaineering, and motoring expeditions. The place was lovely, the weather accommodating, and enjoyment generally reigned.

They were all, or nearly all, seated on the garden terrace one evening, chatting and smoking over their after-dinner coffee. Leveson had only arrived that afternoon, and Acton but a day or two earlier. The latter had been out exploring, had lost his way, and had turned up late for dinner. He came out to them, after a hasty cram, his hands in his trouser pockets, and twirling a big cigar in the corner of his mouth.

“Have a weed, Batten?” he said, halting beside that gentleman.

The reverend author, serenely austere, sat a little apart on a stiff cane chair. He had an immensely high bald forehead like the dome of a bladder, and a long bladdery face, with a tiny mouth placed near the bottom of it. Being sensitive to damp, he had put on snow-boots over his pumps and a grey woollen comforter round his neck. He did not drink or smoke as a rule; but, when he did, his dissipations were Wincarnis and cigarettes de Joy. He waved a tolerant hand.

“No, I thank you,” he answered.

He took some little pains even to demonstrate that cigar-smoke was unpleasant to him. Acton, winking to Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, who was lighting a cigarette hard by, drew up a chair close to the clergyman. The lady did the same on the other side, enclosing him between two fires.

"Pilgrim been on tap to-day, Batten?" asked Acton, emitting a heavy cloud.

The clergyman coughed slightly, leaning away. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto immediately charged him from her place, and he jerked himself back, shuddering. It was a pretty little refined game.

"If I am right in comprehending your inquiry, sir," he said wheezily, "as relating to the progress I have made with my metrical version of the Pilgrim——"

"You are perfectly right, Batten."

"Then, sir, I may inform you that I have been successful in throwing off a complete canto in the course of the morning."

"That's good," said Acton. "And now you feel better, I hope." He squeezed the clergyman's arm, puffing smoke in his face. "I congratulate you, Batten. If you go on at this rate, you'll throw it all off and be well in a fortnight."

Mr. Batten hoped so, being a little obtuse, and not a little vain.

"I flatter myself I'm a pretty rapid worker," he said.

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto put caressing fingers on his as they lay folded in his lap. It was as if she were bribing him with a handful of jewels which sparkled sombrely in the fading sunset.

"Do tell me," she said, "what inspired you to it? Was it because that, like the thrushes, you must sing because you must? I have heard of a whole family being taken that way. First one began to sing, and then another and another, until they were all singing, and couldn't leave



off. Have you many poets in your family, Mr. Batten ? ”

“ Madam,” he answered seriously, “ I am an only child.”

“ Thank God ! ” ejaculated Acton, in a burst of smoke.

Mr. Batten shifted a little, looking darkly from one to the other. He was beginning to wonder if the two were smoking him in a double sense.

“ Why apostrophise the Deity, sir,” said he, “ after that fervent fashion ? ”

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto soothed him timely.

“ Don’t you know,” said she, “ that Mr. Acton, too, is the father of an only child—a literary only child, that’s to say. He loves all only children for the sake of that one. Haven’t you read his ‘ Digest of Grant and Livery ? ’ You’d better try it the next time you are feeling too songsome. It will make you feel livery enough for anything.”

She ended on a loud laugh.

“ Talking of children,” began Acton ; and got sharply to his feet. He had no appreciation whatever of this carrying of the war into his own country. He sauntered over, drawing rather angrily at his cigar, to the main group of talkers. They sat about the middle of the lawn, Lady Woodroffe and Mrs. Owen Merrivale close together, Leveson and Shipley on their one side, Currie, humped up in his lounge-chair, glowering on the other. A few satellites attended in the background.

“ Vulgar beast that woman ! ” Acton spat out under his breath ; and forthwith broke into the conversation without any misgivings :

“Talking of children, did any one here know that John Wisdom, the novelist, was married ? ”

Leveson knew Acton, and didn't like him ; Currie knew and detested him.

“Talking of Mr. F.'s Aunt,” growled the latter, “who's John Wisdom, the novelist ? ”

He had mauled him often enough to know ; but it was beyond his critical condescension to acknowledge.

“O, come ! ” said Leveson, with his jolly laugh. “You mustn't affect that indifference, Currie, you know, to one of our most original romancers.”

“Original ! ” echoed Currie, profoundly disdainful ; and he repeated the word, as if it carried its own condemnation. “Original ! ”

In his heart he envied Leveson, his wide reading and liberal judgment, and the atmosphere of bigness he exhaled. He could have coveted such a reputation for himself ; but that being impracticable to a critic of his temperament, he stood aloof as far as possible, in order to assert his own individuality.

“Well, isn't he ? ” said Leveson.

“If originality is incomprehensibility,” said Currie, “I suppose every idiot out of an asylum is entitled to the term.”

Acton laughed.

“No, but,” said he, not wishing to be talked out ; “*did* any one—amongst those, anyhow, who know of the fellow, and of whom Mr. Currie, it seems, isn't one ? ”

“I didn't,” said Lady Woodroffe, blowing a little jet of smoke through her pursed lips ; “or

why I should, or why any of us should, or care either. He's married, is he? Very well, then he's married."

"He's got a son anyhow," said Acton, grinning. "I met him to-day, and the boy with him. They're living near here."

"Are they indeed? Where?"

Acton sprawled his legs, his hands deep in his pockets.

"Thereby hangs a tale, Lady Woodroffe," he said; "and the argument is this—what in the name of confusion induced you to call your hospitable mansion—there, I won't abuse it by trying?"

"'Bryntyddyn'? I don't know. We called it as it was called."

"Brun—what?"

"All the y's are u's, you know, and the double d's th."

"But there's something else. That rule alone won't fetch a native, you bet, or I shouldn't have gone astray trying to ask my way back."

"No," put in Leveson; "you have to give every vowel and consonant its value in your pronunciation. The Welsh, Mr. Acton, are really a primitive people, and talk, as savages sing, or chaunt, on a chromatic scale, which falls or rises at the instance of the emotions. If you break a word of theirs into intervals, they have a difficulty in recognising it."

"A tongue-curling language," said Acton impatiently. "But never mind that. I was only accounting for my lateness. I went to see the haunted house."



Lady Woodroffe threw away her cigarette, and leaned back, drawing her boa about her, for it was growing chilly.

"You did? Maes-y-Myrddyn? That was bold of you. I haven't been near the place for years."

"There is quite a short cut to it across the valley."

"I daresay. Well?"

Acton puffed away the implication contemptuously.

"A fraud—just an old house in rotten bad repair. And it's not worth restoring either. It would cost more than to build a new one."

"This Mr. Wisdom hasn't taken it, surely?"

"No, but he's taken, it appears, a sort of lodge belonging to it on the hill below. I met him and his son prowling about the place."

"How do you know it was his son?"

It was Mrs. Merrivale who spoke, in her soft rather passionless voice. Acton suddenly remembered her reputed "sincerest form of flattery" to the author in question, and chuckled to himself.

"Because he called him 'Sonny,' Mrs. Merrivale. I gathered that the young gentleman derived from him at least, like some others we've heard of. Wisdom has his admirers, we know; though I must admit I don't count myself one of them."

He was greatly attracted to this Mrs. Merrivale, with her beauty and fortune. But a sort of mischievous innuendo was a habit of his mind, and he often said nasty things when he designed only to be playful.

"I have known him for some years," he said, twitching the ash from his cigar with the little

finger of the hand which held it—"as well as anybody does, I suppose, and that isn't saying much. But he never told me that he was married. Perhaps he isn't."

Nobody, it appeared, valued the subject sufficiently to continue it. A short silence ensued. Acton, however, had not said enough for his own purpose. He had always despised Wisdom; but since the day when that abused novelist had held him up, literally, to ridicule, an active spite had replaced in him the negative sentiment.

"The boy calls him Herne," he went on, "a funny enough arrangement, or caprice, or subterfuge, or however you may choose to consider it. It seems he's discarded his own name, because of the bad odour he's got it into with the public, I suppose. It's convenient sometimes to have an *alias*."

Currie, ostentatiously bored, twisted violently round in his chair, and regarded the landscape wearily. Acton, observant of him, dwelt on the subject with an increased zest.

"He was always a crank of the first water," he said, coolly blowing on his cigar—"a sort of invertebrate Don Quixote, having all that gentleman's folly without his pluck."

"Why?" asked Leveson quietly.

"Why?" echoed Acton. "Isn't that sort of literary knight-errantry a folly in the twentieth century—setting out to rescue the English language from the hands of its accredited guardians, like Shipley there? What do you say, Shipley? *You're* not going to yield your national trusteeship to any faddist striking for style?"

“Don’t know what it means,” said Shipley good-humouredly. “Don’t pretend to criticise my betters. But if it’s something that stands in their way, I should drop it if I was them.”

“You’d get over it somehow, you mean, like the old woman and her pig.”

“I daresay. Nothing’s ever stood in *my* way but just physical endurance. I could make twice as much money as I do, if the day was twice as long as it is.”

“That’s the way to look at it, of course.”

Leveson put in another quiet word.

“We’ll grant his folly. But where does his want of pluck come in?”

“Don’t you know?” said Acton. “Well, I happen to. The fellow hasn’t the courage of his opinions, after all. He has put his tail between his legs and run. The critics and the public have knocked all the wind out of him; and he’s thrown away his pen, and sworn off writing, and come down here to play at being Timon. Who’s the worse for that but himself?”

“A great many people, I think,” said Leveson. He was beginning to lift his royal head, and the light in his eyes was widening. “I am sorry to hear it. Prospero mustn’t bury his staff, and yield back Setebos to the Philistine. He was doing good work.”

“Well,” said Acton impertinently, “cranks have always their backers, I suppose. But you don’t mean to tell me that you understand every word he has written?”

“If I don’t, sir,” said Leveson, “I have the



modesty to attribute it to something wanting in myself rather than in him. If I come across seeming obscurities, or ambiguities of expression and analogy, in a writer whom I find in many ways most delicately responsive to certain moods and emotions of my own, I don't jump to the conclusion that he is out of his depth there, but that some fine sympathetic imaginativeness in him has visualised things which are above my understanding. I should be loath indeed to accuse him of describing what never was or could be, just because my imagination flies on a lower plane than his."

Currie grunted disagreeably. Acton, staring a moment, whistled, wheeled round, and rejoined Mrs. Davenport-Pinto.

"*I think imagination,*" said Lady Woodroffe, softly but clearly, "*is the lost child who came to be king.*"

It was her contribution for the evening, greeted with rapturous murmurs from the background. One or two feminine adorers made a mental note of it for future entrance in their diaries. Lady Woodroffe herself from that moment thought kindly and patronisingly of John Wisdom.

"I hope so," said Leveson genially; "and anyhow I should like to convince you, in this author's case, of its title to some honour. You don't know him, perhaps; I daresay he's very little read, though I'm sorry to hear of his surrender to the groundlings. It's bad art, and he's a real artist. He's one of those who can still set us wondering and delighting in a world which we were inclined to think had yielded us its last sensations of sur-

prise. He's an artist, if ever there was one, gifted with, almost hampered by, a curiously original mind. But what does it matter if the expression of his art is occasionally strange to us? We, of the orthodox speech, aren't going to assert, I hope, that our very limited use of the vocabulary exhausts its potentialities. It stands for the limits, rather, of our capacity for understanding—the very self-satisfied limits. There's a good deal for most of us to learn yet, for all we think ourselves so clever. John Wisdom, as an explorer into the untrodden, could give us, I've no doubt, a hint or two. He has certainly given me, for one, some moments of rare pleasure. I wonder, for instance, if any one among you has chanced across a story of his called 'The Faithless Princess'? It was founded, if I remember rightly, on a Chinese legend, and was published in a magazine not so long ago. It was a good example of the man's style—a fine breath of imagination, in my opinion. But that were all nothing without the art which gave it wings. Eh?"

No, it appeared, no one had.

"Do tell it us, Mr. Leveson," ventured a timid voice from the rear.

The great critic laughed, turning half round.

"My dear young lady—draw a rose and give its essence? That's beyond me."

"Please do."

"Well, I can sketch you the outline, of course, if that will content you."

"O, yes!"

"Very well; it was to this effect:

## “THE FAITHLESS PRINCESS

“There was once a princess who desired to have a palace built for her of the most transcendent loveliness—one surpassing all that art had conceived hitherto. And whosoever designed such to her content should come, for his reward, to be her lord therein. She was known as the Evening Star, so softly fervid was her beauty; and many and many, great artists and great lovers, consumed their hot souls in the effort to design this star her fitting shrine. But one and all they failed; for the lust of possession filled their thoughts, and each unconsciously fashioned out the dwelling of *his* desires rather than of hers who desired nought but the spirit of perfection; so that in the end each earned only mockery and his dismissal.

“But one day there came a sorry little fellow, a hunchback dark and mean, who was from some strange unheard-of country behind the seas; and he offered himself a competitor for the prize. And, when he was brought before the princess and beheld her, ‘Evening Star,’ he said, ‘I will design you even such a palace as shall fill your soul’s content; but it shall be only on the condition that whilst I work you sit where my eyes may look upon you.’ And the princess’s lip curled, and she laughed and consented.

“So, by his wish, a great room was set apart, with a blank wall on which he might work out his design, and a screen raised before; and the princess sat herself beside, in an alcove so placed as that his eyes might feast upon her, but hers see nothing of



the picture on which he wrought. And he worked a long day, and the words he spoke to her in that time were like the music of a running fountain in a haunted wood ; so that, when she dwelt not on him and his wryed meanness, the knowledge of the under-mystery of life seemed to flow in upon her lying half entranced. ‘The pearl lies hidden in its rugged shell,’ he said, ‘and Death reveals it. The only lasting beauty is the soul’s, and Death reveals it.’ And he worked a second long day, and, though it rained without, the room itself grew lambent, and a heavenly languor stole about her senses. And then all at once he wheeled back the screen, and ‘Lo!’ he said, ‘behold the palace of the Evening Star.’

“Then she rose, trembling, and clasped her hands to her heart ; and that leapt once, and thereafter hardly lifted her white bosom.

“‘It is the house,’ she whispered, ‘such as my soul hath dreamed!’

“‘From pinnacle to basement,’ said he, ‘it is all wrought out of love. Come in, sweet love, and grant my soul its guerdon.’

“But at that her breath came ; and, turning, she looked oddly at the misshapen thing, and suddenly she began to laugh.

“‘Thou shalt build this palace for me,’ she said, ‘and be my master architect, and have great honour and renown. But, for the guerdon, I did but jest. Love comes not in to me in such a guise as thine.’

“‘Of love was it conceived,’ said he, ‘and lacking love must perish.’

“And so he bowed his head, and, turning from her, went up, it seemed, to the doors of the fairy fabric, and passed through them and was gone. And, with a cry, the princess leapt to follow him—and staggered and fell back. For there before her eyes was only a dead blank wall and nothing else.”

Leveson ended, and, leaning forward, drew vigorously at his cigar. A short silence ensued.

“Just the skeleton of the thing,” he said, breaking it suddenly, “and a base travesty of his method of telling it. I must really apologise for my assurance; but little madam here must take the blame.”

“Highly original, indeed,” said Currie (he had listened in spite of himself). “And now, do you mind telling us what does it all mean?”

Leveson turned round. “What does it? eh, my dear?” he asked.

“I suppose,” said the girl nervously, “that the princess, unknown to herself, had fallen in love with him.”

“She had learned to see with his eyes, at least,” said Leveson, “and to recognise her own blindness without them. ’Tis said that she gave up her crown and state, and wandered thenceforth through the world, looking for her vanished palace. She died in a Home for Incurables, which she herself had founded before setting forth; and, on the night of her death, which was a night of cloud and moonshine, there were seen some extraordinary castles in the air. Moreover, a little before the dawn, a white dove (so said the watchman) rose through the roof of the hospital, and fled upwards

to those mystic battlements, from which a white dove dropped to meet her. And that is the end of the story."

"Why, my dear," said Lady Woodroffe reproachfully to Mrs. Merrivale, "your hand is as cold as ice. We must go in out of this mist, every one of us."

There was a general rising and movement. Acton darted towards Mrs. Merrivale to lift her cloak about her shoulders.

"Thanks," she said, evading him ; " I can do it for myself quite well."



## CHAPTER XI

LEVESON was not as a rule an early riser. He was a little wont, like Falstaff, to prolong the last convivial hour, if there were merry souls aboard, and was seldom in bed by midnight. But the keen air of "Bryntyddyn" stimulated him to that degree that, on the morning after his arrival, he was up and down before the first breakfast bell had sounded. The opened French windows of the dining-room, giving upon a space of dewy lawn, invited him without, and he stepped, somewhat heavily, into the fresh mists of the morning, and sniffed their incense and dwelt on the prospect with delight. Then he turned, and made for the conservatories, which lay against the eastern wing of the house. He walked with a limp, the result of some old injury to his right foot, and grunted a little in his breathing. A wide felt hat was on his head, and, about his neck, a loose low collar with a crimson tie. He affected nothing in his dress but a somewhat buccaneering ease.

Coming to the glass-houses, he saw that he was not the first to be afoot. Mrs. Owen Merrivale was there before him, moving leisurely between the loaded stands. He went in at once, and greeted her cheerily.

She turned and answered, with a pretty smile, and the faintest pink of pleasure on her cheeks.

“I love to come in here before the rest are down. It is like the garden’s night-nursery, where the babies are still all warm and flushed with sleep.”

Leveson thought the sentiment very apt to this blonde, round-eyed, soft-limbed young woman, who seemed born for maternity ; but he wondered. He had found himself attracted to her already. She was of the build and expression that one would have called lovesome—a child’s woman, a nursery woman. He wondered what the devil she was doing in this galley. She might have been twenty-seven or so ; it did not signify ; at forty-seven women of her constitution often kept the complexion and the freshness and the innocence of girlhood. She had clear, steady eyes of a pale blue, the pupils very small, which gave them an expression of wonder, light brown hair disposed in the Greek fashion, and a nose but one remove upwards from the Greek type, an exceedingly pretty feature. Her dress, of the stuff called cambric, I believe, was of a mauve or lilac colour, and quite simply modelled to a full and shapely figure. She was of a fair height, but not tall.

And, if he was attracted to her, she, for her part, liked this big man, with the atmosphere he exhaled of strength and protection. She greeted him already as if he were an old acquaintance.

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if the sentiment illustrated an experience of night-nurseries ; but worldly wisdom stopped him in time. He knew nothing about her, except that she was a fellow-guest with Mrs. Davenport-Pinto

of Lady Woodroffe, both women with a past. A feeling for night-nurseries was not commonly associated with such. He turned the order of his question into :

“ I like that. ’Twas motherly said. I hope you and I are going to be friends.”

It was, or ’twas, a characteristic trick of his thus to clip his ’tises and ’twases. But great souls sport their little affectations endearingly, and no one would have wished this away. It was just a human touch, a little sweetening bruise on the ripe fruit of his learning.

“ O, I hope so ! ” said young Mrs. Merrivale.

“ Are you an old friend of our hostess ? ” he asked her.

“ O, no ! ” she answered. “ We met quite casually last autumn in Venice, where I have made my home for years, and our acquaintance ripened somehow into an invitation, which I accepted. I hadn’t seen my own country for quite an age ; and Lady Woodroffe has such a bright power of persuasion. She is very clever and attractive, don’t you think ? ”

“ She is a very clever woman—full of wit and wisdom. She claimed acquaintance with you as a sister-authoress, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes—I think so. How did you know I—— ? ”

“ Is Wales your country, Mrs. Merrivale ? ”

She bent, and put her pretty nose to a head of heliotrope.

“ No,” she said. “ What makes you ask ? ”

“ You seized the opportunity for a visit to your own country, you said.”



“O, that! But I didn’t mean—we were in London a week or two before we came here.”

“I understand. So you make your permanent home in Venice—‘Venice the star of the sea—Barakesch, or the thousand-coloured one, as the Arabs call Sirius.’ ”

She looked up quickly, and saw him smiling.

“Mr. Leveson!” she exclaimed.

“Didn’t you call it so?” he asked. “Weren’t those the words?”

“Yes, but——”

“A critic, young woman,” he said good-humouredly, “must start out, for the first of his equipment, with a memory.”

“Did you actually read, and take the trouble to remember—that?”

“I read everything, and remember most that’s worth remembering. I’m not flattering. Like Locksley, the good yeoman, ‘I add my holloa when I see a good shot or a good blow.’ Much of the little series pleased me; though ’tis certain the authoress had been taken with the style of somebody, and let her admiration appear.”

She was bending down again, a deeper flush on her cheeks.

“If you mean John Wisdom,” she said, “I *do* admire him.”

“And none more worthy,” said Leveson; “though I won’t say none better for a model.”

She stood up suddenly.

“Is it true, what Mr. Acton declared,” she said, “that he has taken his want of success so much to heart that he is not going to write any more?”

“We have Acton’s word for it, quoted from first hand. I hope, nevertheless, it is *not* true. ’Tis an author ill to be spared. Pity ’tis that the man lacks the worldly grit. One seems to feel it in his works—too much the obstinate dreamer—though, I should have thought, not of the breed of Keats and Chatterton. It is possible, as some of the swells have shown us, to combine literary independence with an excellent capacity for business.”

“It is so poor, so mistaken, to accept defeat,” she said, almost with passion. “Don’t you think so ? ”

“’Tis not like Prospero,” he agreed. “We must make him disinter his wand again, you and I.”

“With such versatility, such originality,” she said, “to accept the common verdict for a sentence ! I think I rather despise him.”

Leveson smiled.

“Too hard, young lady. Pity him, rather, burdened with such fatal qualities.”

“Why, didn’t you yourself last night praise his originality ? ”

“Now, madam—if I were Dr. Johnson. Don’t you know, madam, that ’tis the worst possible taste to quote a man against himself ? ” He laughed, seeing her distress. “I praised and praise it,” he said ; “but if an author finds a public and desires to keep it, he must repeat himself.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Nor would John Wisdom, you see ; and so he has lost his public. Not popular things, those—and then, his style ! The man set out to court

disaster. I blame him because, fighting a fine losing game from the first, he will not die on the field—if he will not.”

She mused.

“I don’t know what people can want. One of his charms to me has always been that one could never guess what his next story, or even his next sentence was going to reveal.”

“Do you think that a charm?” said Leveson. “Ask Mrs. Davenport-Pinto what she thinks. She’s a critic, I’m told. Ask her what books she praises. The revelations of themselves to themselves, in terms of plainest commonplace, is what the ‘general’ want, and applaud for art. ’Twas the sort that adorned our walls in the early Victorian time. Well, ’tis evident you’ve followed our author’s career with interest and sympathy. Go and bid him resume his staff. There’s persuasion in a woman’s tongue—and when it speaks admiration! There’s the second bell. What is John Wisdom, or all wisdom, to an appetite!”

He took her into his petted confidence there and then. They walked back to the breakfast-room together, and she sat by his side and attended to his liberal wants, as a favourite niece might spoil a loved uncle. The company dropped in one by one, Shipley, who was always early and roseate, arriving first, and after him Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, who, being a bad sleeper, was wont to improve the small hours of the morning and economise time, like a famed wizard of romance, by “making-up” while the rest of the house slumbered. Mr. Batten came next, tripping in in felt slippers. He took his



seat, with a little frown at the plate of game-pie to which the lady was being helped, and rather ostentatiously broke his toast into his coffee. He was no great meat-eater himself; but rather attributed his superlative mental gifts to a diet of well-selected phosphates. He was a man of many theories and only one vanity—self-importance. He had been thinking seriously of things while shaving, and was solemn with their undelivered burden. Presently a dish of porridge was brought in to him. He ate it with a large spoon, holding his left hand to his collar-bone, and opening his jaws and his eyes wide at every mouthful. As regularly as he opened them, his eyes revolved mechanically in the direction of Mr. Leveson, who sat opposite at the end of the table, and as regularly returned to their plate. When he had finished, he wiped his lips delicately, as they might be the mouthpiece of a loved instrument, and prepared to speak, waiting for an accommodating pause.

“Sir,” said he across the table suddenly, “you told us a fairy-tale last night.”

Leveson looked his way good-humouredly.

“Call it rather an allegory, Mr. Batten.”

“I call it, sir,” said the clergyman pompously, “as it should be called, and as I would enter my protest against it. A fairy-tale is a fairy-tale; and to think to justify its currency by tagging on a moral and calling it an allegory is, to my mind, to perpetrate an even peculiarly reprehensible form of what the vulgar call ‘ringing the changes.’”

“Good gracious, Batten!” said Mrs. Davenport-Pinto. “What’s the matter with you?”

"The matter, madam," he said, "amounts to a question of truth."

"Well," she said, "who's not been speaking it, or speaking too much of it?"

"Every one," he answered, "who tells a fairy-tale tells a lie. The habit of this pernicious stuff is a world-wide education in falsehood. If I had my way, I would make one sweep of all the fairy-tales ever printed."

"What a huge sweep he'd be," said the lady. "I shouldn't like to be the baker to fight him."

"I could wish, madam," he said, glancing at her with extreme disfavour, "that you would learn to time your levity."

"I'm crushed," she said.

He turned from her very angrily. Shipley came to his rescue.

"You object to fairy-tales, do you?" said he. "Yet I've been told that nothing pays better."

"Then what in the name of goodness prevents *you* from writing them?" said Mrs. Davenport-Pinto.

"Because they aren't expected of me," said the honest youth, and spoke all his philosophy in that sentence.

Mr. Batten addressed himself directly to the popular author.

"Exactly, sir; and it is a hopeful sign for modernity that a considerable section of the public can be found to despise all that false coin of fancy and imagination."

"Yes, but——" protested Shipley.

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted the clergyman.

“It is a subject on which I feel very strongly. Let us have facts, however gracefully or humorously clothed, for our mental pabulum. Inconsequent extravagance is a demoralising aliment for the sensitive digestion of youth. It fits it no more for the sober realities of life and religion than would a diet of gin and pork-pies. I was glancing lately ” —he looked towards the end of the table with some resentment—“I was glancing lately,” he repeated in a louder tone, “at the house of a friend, through a most terrible Book of Nonsense, aptly so-called, which had been written and illustrated by a man called Lear. The drawings alone were the grossest travesties of anatomy, not to speak of decorum—the most childish things. The accompanying text was, if possible, worse. It professed to explain the pictures in a form of doggerel familiarly known, I believe, as the Limerick. It is possible that some of you may have chanced on the stuff. Yet how little was wanting, but the good taste, to convert this buffoonery into matter for honest instruction and laughter. I amused myself for some time in an effort to re-cast one or two of the rhymes in a palatable shape. But the illustrations were, of course, hopeless—to me, at least, as I have never given my attention to the subtleties of the pencil. Do you happen ever to have come across Mr. Edward Lear’s book of nonsense, Mrs. Merrivale ? ”

The lady addressed looked up.

“To what, Mr. Batten ? ” she said. “I’m afraid I wasn’t listening.”

He repeated his question with an offended solemnity.



“Why, of course,” she said; “who hasn’t? Isn’t it the most delightful thing!”

Mr. Batten sank back in his chair, without another word. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto laughed shrilly.

“Poor Bat!” she said. “He’s looking just like the frog after he’d blown himself up and burst. Never mind; he *shall* roar like a bull some day, he shall.”

Mr. Batten rose from his chair, and walked out into the garden.

“So much for Buckingham,” murmured Shipley.

“He’s a natural product of his age, sir,” growled Currie, who had come down in the meanwhile, and was quarrelling dyspeptically with a wing of cold grouse. “Why do you sneer at your own?”

Leveson laughed.

“What’s the matter with his age?” he said, “’Tis yours and mine, too, you know, Currie.”

“Claim what you like of it,” said the splenetic critic. “I’ll have none of it. An age of empty pretence, without learning or reverence or humour—rich in everything that’s cheap—jumping, pert and cocksure, out of yesterday, with a brush and a bucket of whitewash in its hands.”

“Good gracious!” said Mrs. Davenport-Pinto. “What does it want with them?”

He looked at her dourly.

“What does it want? I should have thought you’d have known. To paint out the past, whitewash monuments, distemper the world, and have a fine fresh canvas on which to plan, without one grace of culture, its *original* designs for the

future. It wants, among other things, to scour St. Paul's."

"Well, for my part, I like things to look clean."

"Clean! There you are! A whited sepulchre."

"I am? O, you detestable man!"

"'Smartness' in place of scholarship—a flashy veneer—an age of blatant ostentation, worshipping the golden calf."

"There, go on with your breakfast, for goodness' sake."

"An age obsessed with materialism, revolting against its ancient gods, talking unutterable nonsense about free thought and emancipation, as if its feet were not tied, like its forefathers', to the bondage of the unchanging soil—an age of vulgar slop and 'shop,' whose rarest flights of imagination can reach no further than the municipal Utopias constructed by its licensed fancy-mongers. There you are. Good God! the ineffable dreariness of those places! the tyranny of their enforced sanitation, more inhuman than a Czar's! Art and literature perish in this commercial atmosphere. The monkey actor, embodiment of pretence, alone grows fat on it, and kicks like Jeshurun. Look at modern Paris, if you want to study the ripe fruits of municipal ideals. I've seen a better city in the coals."

He took an noisy gulp of coffee.

"Poor Mr. Batten!" sighed Mrs. Davenport-Pinto.

Currie looked over his cup balefully.

"I should like him," he said, "to have ventured his stuff in the time of John Wilson, or Croker, or

Gifford. He'd have been poor Mr. Batten indeed. But fools got their deserts in those days."

He was so very personal that nobody ventured to continue the subject. As he sat growling, the beautiful hostess entered the room. She looked about her merrily.

"What a silence!" she said, "I'm sure my cheeks ought to burn."

"'Tis said to ensue on an angel's visit, you know," said Leveson.

"O, thank you!" she answered. "That was very pretty and resourceful. I hope I bring good tidings. The guides have reported that it is *the* ideal day for Snowdon. Are you all prepared to come?"

Leveson, as she looked at him, shook his head.

"I'm neither Mahomet nor Mr. Whymper," he said. "I halt between. And anyhow I've proofs to read."

"I think I must ask you to excuse me, too," said Mrs. Merrivale, a little pink in the face. "I'm not good at—I should only be a drag on the rest."

Lady Woodroffe lifted her brows resigned.

"Any one else?" she protested.

"Yes, me," said Acton. He had come down late, and was eating his breakfast morosely. Mrs. Merrivale, engaged elsewhere, had hardly acknowledged his greeting. "You don't catch me taking all that exertion for nothing."

"Any one else?"

No, it appeared the others were all eager for the expedition. At ten o'clock a couple of motor-cars whirled the party away.



## CHAPTER XII

PERCEVAL ACTON was much exercised in his mind about Mrs. Owen Merrivale. He could find out nothing definite concerning her, except that she was a wife—he hoped a widow—without “encumbrances” of any sort whatever and *with* a considerable fortune. That, and the attractions of her face and person, were established facts, and very pleasant ones to consider; but were they, so to speak, eligible facts? He had gone, in the first instance, to Mrs. Davenport-Pinto for information on this point, and that lady’s answer had been decisive and comforting. “There is no mystery whatever about the matter,” she had said. “She is the widow of a brute who robbed and maltreated her, until death came opportunely to put an end to his little game.”

That, of itself, was an extremely clear and satisfactory statement; but unfortunately it was not borne out by Lady Woodroffe who, after all, had been the one responsible for the discovery and production of the mysterious heiress, and to whom the cautious and astute young lawyer made a point next of applying. He had to exercise more diplomacy here in extracting his evidence; and it proved far from reassuring when extracted. Venetian gossip, intimated Lady Woodroffe, had

credited, or debited, Mrs. Merrivale with a past part, as blameless petitioner, in some obscure divorce-suit; but whether the ex-husband were living or dead, or whether the decree had been an absolute decree, or one merely of judicial separation, she did not know. Naturally, she said—perhaps in answer to his unspoken inquiry—she had not put the question to the person most interested. There was an unwritten law of delicacy in these matters, and one had no more right to probe, uninvited, a woman's past, than one had to sneak into her kitchen to see if her pies were not made of cat's-meat—a very pertinent analogy, which savoured refreshingly of Miss May Flowerdew.

Acton thought otherwise; but he kept his reflections to himself. He had for some time now been considering the chances of wedlock, and had come to the conclusion that he had reached that psychologic point where candidature for the highest matrimonial prizes begins to be justified. He weighed himself in fancy against beauty and fortune, and found the balance in his favour. The difficulty simply was that the two occurred only rarely in combination, and were then rather humiliatingly clamoured after. Not that he had any scruples as to his own desirability; only he could not afford the time for philandering with any mistress whose whimsies might call for a protracted siege.

But now, in Mrs. Merrivale, opportunism, it seemed, could not more have favoured him. The lady was richly endowed in the two excellent senses; the long vacation gave the necessary

leisured opportunity ; no rival worth considering was present in the market. He might bid unchallenged, if only he could be sure that the goods were genuine. If he had any sentiment in the matter, it rather inclined towards a personable and wealthy widow, whose experiences amounted to a sobering education in wifedom. The occasion admitted of no idle temporising ; by means open or underhand he must timely ascertain the truth. Baffled elsewhere, he decided, characteristically, to go to the fountain-head. He came confidently to the essay on the morning of the Snowdon expedition.

Mrs. Merrivale had taken her books to a shady corner of the terrace, where there was a bench under the trees. He came out to her sprightly and humming, and affected a well-acted surprise at seeing her before him. She felt a little as if a barrel-organ had broken suddenly into the harmony of her solitude ; but that he couldn't guess. She had been writing with a pencil on paper, but put both rather hurriedly away as he came up, which he did not fail to notice.

“Recording your ‘Impressions’ ? ” said he, with the tiniest snigger. He could not conceive a woman expecting to be taken seriously in these matters. “I should like to know if I’m included in ’em, Mrs. Merrivale ? ”

He sat down on the bench beside her, without the least misgiving. She put a pile of books between, and leaned back with a sigh. It might have expressed resignation or annoyance ; he read it for gratification. Fortunately or unfortunately a sigh



is expressionless. Indigestion or love may produce it without a shadow of distinction.

“Would you?” she said. “And supposing they weren’t flattering?”

He laughed comfortably.

“A very gratifying sign I should take it. Women exist on paradox. Their real regards are often expressed in terms of abuse.”

“Indeed? As a lawyer, I suppose, you have had the best opportunity of observing.”

“Yes, indeed. You are without the logical faculty, you know. Slander is veiled approval in your eyes, and the law a bat for not seeing with ‘em. A woman can never understand why established rules of conduct should apply to herself. She will take a dog into a garden in the face of a printed prohibition, and talk in a reading-room where silence is imposed. And she will be beaten, too, and screech for help, and scratch out the eyes of the policeman who comes to arrest the wife-beater.”

“I see you know us very well. How nice to be understood like that.”

“It doesn’t require much understanding, Mrs. Merrivale, or much discrimination to see your greatest charm in it.”

She made a little movement as if to rise.

“I’m for a stroll, too, if you are,” he said.

She sank back again.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I don’t feel quite secure about the paradox. But don’t let me detain you.”

“O, I’m all right!” he answered—“never more

so. Do you take an interest in the law, Mrs. Merrivale ? ”

“ Not a great deal, I’m afraid.”

“ Suffered by it, perhaps, at some time or another ? ”

“ No. I’m afraid I’m a libel on my sex. I’ve always been quite willing to abide by it.”

“ That’s natural, where it’s procured you some comfort or release. I daresay it has in your time. *Separatio a vinculo matrimonii*—eh ? ”

“ I don’t know what you mean.”

“ Why, it makes the bonds of matrimony not quite indissoluble, you know. There’s something to be said for it.”

“ Yes ? ”

“ Isn’t there, I say ? Mrs. Merrivale—” he leaned a little towards her, a bold assurance in his eyes—“ I’ve learned a little of your story, but only a little—enough to know that it contains a secret. You don’t know how I long to serve you. I am already a power in my profession, I may boast, and am going to be a greater. If you care to confide in me, I am entirely at your command.”

She had risen, and was looking down on him a little breathlessly.

“ Your discretion, Mr. Acton,” she said, “ is, I am sure, sufficient proof of your fitness for the part you solicit ; only unfortunately I have no secrets to confide.”

He could not mistake her tone. He sat back sulkily, lolling at uneasy ease.

“ O, very well ! ” he said. “ I only spoke out of

a regard which I was too honestly in earnest to conceal."

"I am glad to hear your explanation," she said. "It sounded to me so much like something else."

She gathered up her books and papers, and left him. Her face was flushed, and her bosom heaving a little. I think she fully understood the young gentleman's Machiavelism, and was pleased in an indignant way to have thwarted it. But it was discomfoting to know that here was a potential suitor. Perhaps he would accept his rebuke and go.

In any case she had no intention of risking a further encounter with him in deserted "Bryntyddyn," so she decided upon a long saunter over the hills. She left word that she would not be in to lunch, and went out by the drive, which curved in a wide horse-shoe round the step of the hill, embracing the house. A short distance down, a wicket-gate let into the woods, and by this path she went, moving, rather quickly at first, over the muffling pine-needles. And presently, turning a corner, she saw a man before her—Mr. Leveson.

She paused, a little embarrassed, feeling herself an intruder on the great critic's meditations. But he had already heard her, and came limping back with a reassuring face.

"Are you like me," he said—"a scorner of lunch? That's good. We'll take our constitutional together, shall we?"

"Please," she said, "if I'm not in the way."

He glanced at her curiously. Her face was flushed, and her breath coming rather quickly; but he forebore to question. He was a creature



of wide understanding and sympathies. "Some impertinence of Acton's," he concluded.

They went on together, not speaking for a little. Presently he blew a long breath. "'God's in His heaven—All's right with the world,' " said he.

She smiled.

"So I think," she said. "I'm glad you don't agree with Mr. Currie."

"O! but I do in a measure," he answered; "only I haven't, like him, survived my generation. My sympathies, too, are with the past; but life tugs at my heart-strings, and I must go with it. Yet he's in the right so far—that England has never thought so little as it does to-day of its own history. 'Tis not interested in its past, or in any past. 'Tis occupied in living, not thinking. Leisure and solitude have not only no charms for it, but it hardly recognises their meaning. There are no rewards nowadays for the meditative man."

"Don't you think that meditation often means stagnation—a poor unpractical spirit?"

"Yet things have been done in cells and hermitages, young woman, that came to benefit the world without enriching the benefactors."

"I'm afraid, all the same, that my sympathies go out most to the strong spirits who can stand between the past and future, and make each pay toll to the other; like—like some of the swells you know."

He laughed, catching the drift of her thoughts.

"O, well!" he said. "We can train our capacities so long as they exist; but supposing we are constitutionally wanting in this and the other?"

We may be fine brave writers—literary independents—yet lack altogether the business head of a Byron or a Dickens.”

She flattered him softly.

“I think you have a just word for everybody. It is not the case with all critics, I am sure.”

“It should be,” he said. “There is seldom any producer who is worthless throughout. A critic’s business is to *appreciate*, in the proper sense of the word. He must be all things to all men—never a faddist, or partisan, or schoolman. He must have only one standard—workmanship, and he must judge all production in the proportion of its conformation to that ideal, whether it be Shakespeare’s sonnets or Mr. Batten’s metricised Bunyan.”

She smiled.

“But surely workmanship isn’t everything, Mr. Leveson?”

“Why not?” he said. “Doesn’t it include a choice of material as well as of design? What would you think of a craftsman who carved an elaborate oak frame to hold a picture-postcard, or of a poet who wrote an epic in rhyming jog-trot?”

As they talked, they had emerged from the trees upon an open rock-strewn meadow, which, going down before them into a grassy gully, rose on the farther side into a thinly-wooded hill topped with thickets, which just revealed themselves, hanging in a dense epaulet, over the shoulder of the bryn. Sheep were cropping the grass, and under a beech hard by an ancient shepherd was snoring.

“‘The Lord my pasture shall prepare, And feed

me with a shepherd's care,' " said Leveson, with a rumbling laugh.

Mrs. Merrivale turned with distaste from the vision of the sleeping rustic.

"I hate that symbol of the shepherd and the lamb," she said; "it is so wrong and illogical. The shepherd, you see, is the real wolf—the horrible hypocritical, commercial wolf—who guards the fold for the butcher."

He looked at her with amusement.

"Hullo!" he said. "It seems that the commercial and the imaginative spirits aren't always admirable in union?"

She answered nothing to that, and they descended the hill together and began to mount the opposite slope.

"Do you know where we are going?" she asked.

"I should," he said, "if I'm following my directions. Do you?"

"No; I've never been out on this side before."

He did not enlighten her, and they toiled up, chatting fitfully. As they neared the crowning thickets, they found that what had looked to them insignificant from below was in reality a dense grove of wood and spinney covering the whole scalp of the hill. Suddenly, set in the thick foliage, they came upon an antique iron gate barring the entrance to the oddest green lane.

Mrs. Merrivale exclaimed—"What a strange, haunted——!" and suddenly checked herself and said no more. Some quick association of ideas sent the word fluttering back on her heart. She was afraid to protest, afraid to speak, because she



knew that her voice would sound unsteady. Mechanically she followed her companion, as he swung open the complaining gate and entered the drive.

The influence of the dumb place flowed upon them without a sound. It seemed as if not a leaf had stirred in it since Herne and Robin had moved along its hushed alleys a week or more ago. Was it always thus, stagnating in a dead silence, holding its breath appalled, as if it knew that some crouched horror in its midst were watching it for a sign of life, prepared to spring if it moved? Not a bird flitted in its tangle; not a living — yes, a rat, balancing a hunched brown body on nimble feet! It fled across the mossy track and disappeared. Leveson broke the silence:

“I’ve never welcomed a rat before. So-ho, my brownie!”

He banged his stick down on the walk, with a cheery laugh. She shivered; then rallied to the healthy breeze of him.

“Mr. Leveson,” she said, in a scared protesting whisper; “you are taking me to the haunted house?”

“It seems so,” he answered. “You are not afraid? But if misanthropic authors *will* so guard their approaches!”

“Authors!” she echoed faintly. “You are going to see John Wisdom?”

“Yes,” he said; “and you.”

She stopped and drew back immediately.

“No,” she said. “That indeed I am not. I never guessed for a moment that *that* was your destination.”

“What!” he protested. “Prospero!”

“It would be a kind and natural courtesy on your part,” she said; “an impertinence on mine. Please don’t ask me to do it.”

She appeared so moved and distressed that he waived the point at once.

“’Twas the unthinking rogue in me. Come, we’ll go back.”

“No,” she said, even more distressed. She knew what the exertion of the climb had been to him with his lameness. “I’ll wait for you, if you’ll let me.”

“Not here?” he said.

She faltered, looking about her.

“Isn’t it strange?” she answered. “Perhaps, if we went on a little farther——?”

They threaded the long alley, and emerged from it—and came upon the ruined house rotting in its green alcove. For minutes they stood staring up at it—and the house stared down at them.

“Nor here,” said Leveson suddenly. “You must come farther yet.”

“I’m not a coward,” she whispered, with a faint smile—“nor prudish; but I don’t like being looked at like that.”

He seemed to understand her, for he made no reply. They went down the hill together, and turned a corner. Leveson stopped, with an exclamation.

“That’s his house,” he said.

She shrank back instantly, out of sight.

“That little building by the water? Very well, I’ll wait here for you. What a pretty place!”

He promised not to keep her long, and went down. She sat herself on a fallen log, and steeled herself to patience. There was a certain trapped and haunted feeling in her mind. She told herself it was nonsense, yet could not face the prospect of returning alone. On the other hand she dreaded unspeakably her discovery by John Wisdom. Would he ever believe that her intrusion on his retirement was unintentional?

She sat, very quiet, between Scylla and Charybdis, her parasol hiding her face, fearful of betraying herself by a movement. The sunflakes, in that dappled glen, caught and kissed her from cheek to knee. She looked as lovable a figure as one might wish to come on in a green place. Nearly half-an-hour passed, and then, all at once, the thing she had dreaded actually happened. Footsteps sounded on the hill below, and she heard voices approaching. She rose to her feet with a little gasp. Her face under her parasol was like shaded ivory. She wanted to run, and could not; she stood as if paralysed, looking down.

"Mrs. Merrivale," said Leveson. She raised her eyes to his, and saw them full of a deprecating humour. "No fault of mine," they said. "He *would* come." Then he gave the formal introduction.

"Mr. Herne, whom I hope I may be allowed to call a friend of mine."

"Not——" she whispered, and stopped.

"If you were going to say John Wisdom," said the stranger, "he's dead and buried."

He had come and stood before her, and had



taken her right hand into his, where it lay limp and unresponsive.

“And a friend of yours, too, Mrs. Merrivale, shall it be ? ” he said, in his soft kindly voice.

The dazzle seemed to leave her eyes. She stilled her trembling lips, and looked up at him resolutely.

“An old friend, if I may say so,” she answered.

Leveson laughed.

“You must bear in mind that Herne is *not* an author,” he said.

“A Dutchman—I’m a Dutchman—O, lawk, Mary ! ” broke in an odd throaty voice. Mrs. Merrivale, following its direction, saw a strange boy standing aside, with wide solemn eyes fixed upon her, and a green parrot on his wrist.

She withdrew her hand gently from the loose clasp of the other.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE problematic was become the actual, and Herne and Robin were established as tenants in the old pump-house of Maes-y-Myrddyn. Less than a week had sufficed to see the business through, the agreement drawn, and the rooms furnished. Herne had found no difficulty in coming to terms with the factor or provost, a bleak old attorney, who nevertheless had made obvious his satisfaction over this unexpected little windfall. He had even pressed drily for immediate occupation, and, finding that intended, had interested himself in the question of furniture, which he offered to convey at his own cost, a proposal which the tenant heartily accepted. So a couple of camp bedsteads with their accessories were bought, and, together with two small wash-hand-stands, two deal tables, four Windsor chairs, a half-dozen rugs of sorts, some linen, and vessels and kitchen utensils various, were loaded into the factor's cart and driven off along the main road, from which direct access could be gained, up a long grassy track, to Maenol-y-Neuadd, or the Hall Hamlet, which was the name of the tiny homestead where Robin had been left. But Herne himself, carrying Ferdinand in a basket, took his way thither over the hills.

He had his reasons for making this détour. On

those liberal heights it would be easy to detect if one were being watched or followed. He hoped, and believed, that a certain suspicion in himself were ill-grounded; yet nothing could be lost by precaution. The fact was that his sense of confident security had received a jar the day before at the hands of a garrulous stranger, who had accosted him in the street with some story of a favourite deceased parrot, boasting virtues, it would appear, which were to be made a text of comparison with those of Ferdinand, whom the said stranger, it seemed, passing the open window of Herne's rooms, had seen sitting and talking on the lodger's finger. There had been a profusion of "beg-pardons" and "'scuse-me's," followed by some quite impertinent questionings as to where Herne had procured the bird and how educated him; and, finally, the stranger, apparently offended by the manner of his reception and inclining to wax personal, had been persuaded to retire, leaving an injurious benediction behind him. Which was all very unimportant unless—unless what? There was the jar, which was like biting on a stone in bread. Had it been possible that the man had been bluffing—a private inquiry agent, or possibly even a detective from Scotland Yard? Herne recalled the narrow sandy face and foxy eyes—inebriated he had supposed them. He hardly fancied a man could so *act* the offensive familiar stranger. Still, it was as well to take no odds. He carried Ferdinand therefore over the hills, and in the end was satisfied that no one had followed to track him to his destination.



Of course he told Robin nothing of his suspicions. Light as they were, they would have sat like a thunder-cloud on that alarmed young forehead. The boy received him in a kindling rapture. He had got through these days winning credit and goodwill, even enjoying his probation; but all the time he had been longing for Herne's return. The best of life was but a makeshift without that wonderful man. The villagers had fancied and petted the little white creature—y chwedlydd-bychan, the little story-teller, they had called him down there.

What a delight it was bestowing their furniture, adapting themselves to that life of a woodland hermitage; what a perpetual game, and after the most approved educational pattern, blending instruction with amusement! Herne, it appeared, had forgotten one or two things—such as chests of drawers. However, there was a roomy cupboard in the kitchen which served most purposes, and time in which to remedy all defects in their ménage. He had arranged for a woman from the hamlet to come up daily and make their beds and do their simple cooking on the primitive range. He had not, you may be sure, forgotten a supply of books—chiefly English Classics, at from sevenpence to a shilling a volume, which he had procured from the railway station at Caer-Gollwyn—though reading did not figure largely in his present philosophy of life. But he felt bound to concede thus much to his position of guide and mentor. For the rest he was resolved to look neither backwards nor forwards, nor to consider any end,

logical or fortuitous, to the existing state of things. No doubt there was something defiant and irresponsible in all this ; but the world of orthodoxy had not treated him well, and he believed he owed nothing to its canons of conduct. They never spoke about it, he and Robin. It remained a tacit understanding between them that the past was not to be referred to.

So they settled down to a sweet and primitive existence—of day-long wanderings ; of an intimate and unharmed study of nature ; of robust appetites and dreamless sleep. They told stories to one another, lying in the brake or on the hill-stones—sometimes sitting in the gloom of their little parlour, or by candlelight, when the torrent gushed and the wind moaned outside. The world about them was all wild and remote, haunted by a thousand legends, populated only along its beaten tracks. Those they seldom trod ; but took the untamed solitudes to their hearts, and more and more hugged themselves into assurance of abandonment by the world and forgetfulness of it.

Very early they familiarised themselves with the terrors of the haunted Hall above ; and, though they could never quite resolve upon the sacrilege of a forced entrance, sought, as it were, “ a bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth.” They mounted the weed-grown terraces, and prowled about the crumbling walls ; they swished through the sodden tangle of the gardens ; dared the silent box-walk, and explored a dozen ruined outhouses. It was by way of these that they once came to penetrate to a strange place. They had passed

to the right of the house and behind it, going up by ricketty stables and byres, across a silent yard with a rusty pump sprouting from its midst. A broken gate at the other end led them out upon a roughly levelled path, whose edge was the lip of the quarry in which the house was built. All above and before ran the hillside of dense trees. To the left, the back windows of the Hall, few and dismal, peered up at them as they went by. They were not all shuttered, these windows, and it was rather fearful to look into their sleek glooms, and fancy what one liked of the movements going on within. The two did not seem to care to linger there.

But, beyond the house, the path widened out into a narrow plateau, thronged with beech-trees whose lower trunks shot up leafless to a height of twenty feet or more; and the ground was all soft mast. And thence, looking down through interlacing foliage, far and intricate, one caught glimpses of a happy country, remote and golden in the sunshine.

A lovely melancholy spot—lovely in itself and in its prospect; yet, close as it was to all that fear and ruin, there seemed something in its atmosphere quite sorrowfully removed from them. In its hushed glooms, in the drooping of its boughs and heavy weeping of its leaves, there dwelt a suggestion of utter forlornness, of a hopeless yearning, as it were, for the lost thing that could never come again. Was it youth or innocence or love? Had Christ, the boy woodlander, once chanced upon this way, and, finding the place



accurst, fled onwards with averted eyes? Had wickedness caught, gasping, at that vision, feeling the stone of her cruel heart dissolving to its beauty, and thereafter sunk and wept herself to death? A neo-Platonic fancy, thought Herne, as he stood and felt the influence of the silent place come soft about him like a hamadryad's arms. An exclamation from Robin aroused him. "O, Herne! Come and look here!"

The boy had climbed a few paces up the bank behind, and was poised at an angle, looking down at something. Herne leapt, and joined him.

A strange sight, indeed—an old, old reservoir, sunk in the hillside, paved and skirted with stone. Half fountain and half tank, it had once, no doubt, been used to supply the house below with water. There was a broken lion-head in the wall opposite, but its antique lips were age-long choked with moss. Moss and weed and lush lilies fattened in the stagnant pool, carpeting its floor, half-covering its surface. What moved between floated in secresy; only now and again a scarce-perceptible undulation, a belch of rising bubbles, an oily suck between the lily leaves, told that watchful curious things were there. It needed no more than this dead fountain, stained and overgrown and forgotten, to fill the haunted picture for Herne. What satyrs had bathed their hooves, what nymphs their rosy feet in it in the time before the great renunciation! What wild sweet calls and rapturous pursuits had ended at it in the days when it was a bubbling spring-head, and Dryope the living melody of her name!

Herne ate his supper that evening in a curiously quiet mood. The green tank was on his mind. He alluded to it more than once, quoting "the fat weed that roots itself in ease on Lethe Wharf." "Would any one dare to drain off its waters," he said, "and paddle knee-deep in that spongy ooze? Not I, I think. I shouldn't know what to expect or dread; but I *should* dread." He turned his chair, so that he could look out through the open door into the shrouding mists of evening. "Lethe!" he murmured—"we have found it at last, Robin, without doubt—'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.'"

A shadow crossed the little bridge, and there in the doorway stood Acton.

The two recognised, each the other, on the instant.

"What—*the*—devil!" whispered the barrister.

He was far more dumbfounded than Herne.

"I looked in to ask my way," he began, and stopped.

Herne rose and came to him.

"One good turn deserves another, Acton," he said. "If you take my advice you'll go and cut your throat."

Acton blanched a little. The sombre place, his own weariness, his memory of his last encounter with this man and genuine doubts as to his sanity, all combined to put him off his nerve for the moment. He gave a rather shaky laugh.

"O, don't be a fool!" he said. "What in 'nation's name are you doing here, Wisdom?"

"Wisdom!" The other beckoned to the boy.

“Come here, Robin sonny. How do you know me—by what name?”

The boy rose and came forward, the parrot on his wrist. Some slumbering apprehension was in his eyes.

“This is Herne, sir,” he said to the stranger. “You must call him that, if you please.”

The parrot caught at the name—“Herne! O, Herne!”—and rocked with diabolical small laughter. Acton stood stupefied.

“You are mistaken, you see,” said Herne. “But, after all, I know you, Acton, better than you know me. What am I doing here, do you say? Why I am vegetating, in company with Robin Goodfellow—I am curing me of my grievous wounds, like Arthur in Avalon—I am living the new life of utter self-possession, after having gathered together the little pieces into which I had cut myself to feed a carnivorous public.”

“O, for God’s sake be serious! I have lost my way, I tell you.”

“I have not got it, you know, Acton. I never liked your way. Upon my word I could almost congratulate you.”

“You won’t help me, then?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“To ‘Bryntyddyn.’ I am staying at Lady Woodroffe’s—went exploring and got benighted. I tried to explain down below; but there’s no understanding the jargon of these fools. They wanted to send me off in that direction.”

“Yes, that was by the road. Their ill-considered



jargon was a kindly attempt, probably, to persuade you from taking this more direct way by the haunted house."

"Haunted fiddlestick! I've heard of it. Do they take me for a chawbacon to be frightened at a turnip? So I came on up here, and saw you sitting, but without recognising you. Wisdom, what an extraordinary encounter!"

"Herne, if you please. A damned extraordinary encounter, *I* should call it. Well, I'll put you on your way with pleasure."

Acton breathed his relief.

"Will you? That's a good fellow. Who's our young friend?"

Having propitiated, he would have vented his satisfaction in some genial patronage; but Herne manœuvred him outside. "I shall be back in ten minutes, sonny," he called to the boy.

Robin sat down to await his return. There was a vague alarm in his heart. He could not define what or whence it was. A fear had crossed him, that was all—a fear like a chill wind blown across a sunny court. It had been so utterly warm and contentful, and now there was a cloud.

He looked up anxiously when he heard the familiar step on the bridge. Herne came in, and threw his hat into a corner. There was a sort of glittering excitement on his face.

"Our shrine is desecrated," he said. "What mischievous destiny led us to fix it here!"

He sat down at the table and buried his face in his hands. Robin stole up and put an arm over his shoulder.

“Is he a friend of yours, Herne?” he said.

The man laughed, and lowered his hands, and sat staring.

“As the world calls it, Robin. I knew him in London. But he isn’t all. We have pitched our tent, it appears, near a very camp of the Philistines. This ‘Bryntyddyn!’ Why did no friendly pixy warn us, when we went by it that night in the rain! Town people; and a house-party; and our neighbours; and—O, Lord! They will come down upon us—I know it—and vex our green solitudes. Such a crew, Robin—he gave me some of their names; yet there are one or two among them who count. A mad destiny—an insane confounding destiny!”

He got up, and set to pacing hurriedly to and fro. For all his own uneasiness, the boy could not help wondering over his friend’s vehemence and greater agitation. He stood by the table, watching him painfully.

“Did he mind the house, Herne?” he put in presently.

Herne stopped.

“The house?” he said. “Not he. The fellow’s an insensate bullock, without nerves or imagination. He just looked at it—‘Is that the place?’ says he; ‘no wonder no one can live in it’—and he shrugged his shoulders and went on, talking of other things.”

He seemed to notice something white and drawn in the boy’s expression; for his own suddenly became gentle, and he walked across and passed his arm under the youngster’s.

“Come,” he said ; “let’s have an evening of story-telling. Who knows what peace is to be ours in the nights to come.”

They sat down on either side the table.

“You begin, Herne,” said Robin.

“Very well,” said Herne. “Mine shall be short and tragic. Have you an idea to follow ? ”

“Yes, I think so. It came to me, out of something you had told me, up by that old reservoir.”

“And mine, too, I think. We’ll see how differently it inspired us.”

### HERNE’S STORY

“Once, in a green place by a fountain, there stood the statue of a beautiful man. None knew who had carved it, or in what age ; only it had ever been there, the admiration and worship of all nymphs and shepherds. When one wished to pray for increase in his flocks, for flowers in her garden, for store of oil or apples, one came and knelt before the marble man and begged him. Then, if the statue were kind the prayer was granted ; yet, as often as not, the favour was withdrawn in the fullness of its own fruition. The orchard would rot of its richness ; floods would drown the harvest ; a wind would search the vineyards and scorch the grapes before plucking-time. And that was worse than first denial ; for hope had made men extravagant, and disappointment mad, so that they would fight among themselves for the poor residue of profit, and shed a vat of blood. It seemed as if the marble man loved



blood as well as flowers—could make his vine-press of the bodies of nymphs and shepherds, did once the caprice seize on him. But he was beautiful, and always and through all he kept the hearts of his worshippers in his green place by the fountain—always, until the thing befell.

“That was the worship of a maiden—not adoration, as befitted an immortal’s petitioner, but love, as a woman loves a man. She would steal day by day to the marble shrine, and weep, when none was by, and pray the gods to give this love to her, as they had given Galatea to Pygmalion—to be loved by a marble man! And in the end, weary of her solicitations, the gods gave him to her, and she woke one morning to find a little baby on her breast—just like your princess, Robin.

“But, lo and behold! on that same morning the statue was gone. It had disappeared from its pedestal by the fountain, and the nymphs and shepherds were left to mourn—grievously and in amazement, for they had supposed it to be immortal.

“Well, the boy, like a tinted copy of the statue in small, grew up and became a man. He was the loveliest creature, but as cold and hard and cruel as a rhinoceros. All the nymphs were pining out of love for him, and all the shepherds green with jealousy. What did he care for one or t’other. He took what he wanted and gave what he wanted, and, when that was a blow, his fist struck like marble. The country-side was scattered with his human ruins, maids and men. With his wretched mother he was always gentle, but as cold as an iceberg. ‘You have no heart,’ she would cry,

‘or how could you thus wring mine?’ She was for ever complaining of his lack of a heart and of the pain in her own. ‘This heart,’ he would answer—‘What is it? where do you keep it? what difference does it make?’ Then she would clutch her breast. ‘It is here,’ she would gasp—‘my torment and my ecstasy. O, that you could take it from me and ease my anguish!’ He heard her words, and that night he came creeping, and, as she slept, plunged a knife into her breast in order that he might cut out her heart and relieve her pain. And she gave one scream and died. But he threw down the blade, and stood staring. ‘What!’ said he; ‘is it death to touch this thing? Better to have, like me, no heart to touch, than to nurse this poisonous adder in one’s bosom!’ And the next morning, when they came to seize him he was nowhere to be found; but there, on its old pedestal by the fountain, was the marble man again, smiling from its soulless inscrutable eyes.”

### ROBIN’S STORY

“You remember the plant you showed me, Herne, that catches flies in its leaves?”

(Herne: “Yes, Robin; the little sundew.”)

“There was a much more formidable kind, you said, that grows in America, and that not only catches, but eats what it catches, like a spider.

“Once a very curious botanist came upon one of these plants growing on the skirts of a strange forest. It poked out between the immense trunks,

half hiding, and half watching for its prey. It was larger and more ravenous than any of the sort he had seen. A pool of dark water slept beside, and on it floated many husks and hairs of the things it had devoured. But the botanist dug it up, and it writhed like a wounded snake. 'I will take it home,' thought he; 'for it is an abnormal growth; and I will feed and feed it until it loves me like a dog.' So he took it home, and set it in a large pot, and fed it with juicy meats three times a day. And the leaves closed round the particles, enjoying and devouring them. And he gave it larger and larger pieces, so that it grew; and presently it loved the botanist like a dog, bending towards him and opening and shutting its fleshy leaves like mouths whenever he came to feed it. And in time it was as high as himself; and it began to make hoarse low noises out of its leaves, so that the botanist could hardly believe his ears, and he grew afraid. But one day something called him from home, and he was not able to feed the plant; and in the evening he went to see it, and, behold! it had come out of its pot, and was lying all limp and faint on the floor. And its roots were slowly stretching and contracting like the talons of a dying bird. Then the botanist grew more afraid; but, nevertheless, he lifted the plant and set it again in its pot, and fed it till it gradually revived, for his science was more to him than his fear. But the next day he thought, 'Perhaps I am doing a shocking thing, and what is to be the end?' So he resolved to give it less food by degrees, until it should come to be satisfied with



what it used to have ; and that day he fed it with only two meals, leaving out supper. And he went to bed presently and slept. But in the night he awoke, hearing a strange sound on the stairs, like as if something were scratching and labouring along the walls and dragging a heavy weight behind it. And he lay sweating, hardly daring to breathe. And the thing came on, even to the door of his room, and it seemed to pause there, panting. And presently it pushed the door gently open, and he heard it shuffling and hopping across the floor. And it climbed the curtains of his bed, using its roots like claws ; and it hung there like a monstrous bat, and was still a moment. And then suddenly he knew that its great hairy leaves were feeling softly about in the dark for his face, and——

“ Herne, I’m frightening myself ! ”

Herne rose, with a leap and a laugh, and came round to Robin’s side of the table. The boy’s face was as white as chalk.

“ You little imaginative donkey ! ” he said. “ I saw that you were over-reaching yourself. I can’t have you conjuring up these visions. Come out and look at the stars—the clean, good, honest stars, Robin. But you are a wonderful boy, all the same.”

## CHAPTER XIV

THE invasion of their solitudes which Herne had foreseen came to happen soon enough. He received Leveson, like the sweet-humoured soul he was, with a charming courtesy, and even a kindling recognition of the honour done him in the visit of so distinguished a man, though he affected to wonder over the gratuitous attention to one so insignificant as himself. His persistence in this pose did not satisfy the critic, who thought it childish and unworthy, and who could not altogether fathom the bitterness which lay behind. Nevertheless, as Herne would be Herne—though quite willing to take an abstract interest in the discussion of John Wisdom as a writer to be counted, or discounted—the other was obliged to humour him and to be content with proffering his views at second hand.

“I am told,” said he, “that you have shot your last quill at the public, and broken your bow.”

“*I!*” protested Herne.

“Well,” said the other, with a good-natured laugh; “I hope it isn’t true of John Wisdom, anyhow. Authors of his calibre are ill to be spared.”

“I could write his epitaph on that,” said Herne. “He was so ill to be spared that he died of neglect.”

“I trust not, indeed.”

“Mr. Leveson,” said Herne winningly, “I believe

you have an eye and a word for everything sound in literature. Forgive me if I am presuming. Did you ever review a book of his in his time, may I ask ? ”

“ Never, I think.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ So it chanced. One never came my way professionally, I suppose.”

“ Yet you considered him a writer ill to be spared ? ”

“ Most certainly. He had some rare qualities.”

“ I take your word for it. If he had, he was pilloried for them, and you, I conclude, sympathised with him—and looked on ? ”

“ Assuredly I sympathised.”

“ It never occurred to you, I suppose, that the pillory makes an admirable rostrum, with an audience ready provided ? Popular passions are often amenable to the arguments of the strong. You might have got him cheered instead of pelted.”

“ Well, you are driving at something.”

“ It is an age, Mr. Leveson, of enormous over-production in literature—especially in the literature of fiction. Most of it, one must admit, is bad. Most of it, also, is favourably reviewed, and a large measure of it eulogised. I have known a good writer to be recommended by his reviewers to adapt himself to the standard of that measure if he would court success.”

“ No doubt, Mr. Herne, an age of silly literature evolves its silly reviewers. Unfortunately, at the same time, press of business prevents wise editors from confining silly reviewers to the discussion of



silly books. What is to be done? One cannot check the enterprise of those unscrupulous publishers who trade upon the vanity of the incompetent, flooding the market with their trash on the system of small profits and quick returns—to the publishers, that is to say. All this stuff has to flow into the editorial sanctum, and thence be invested in notices which shall yield a certain return in advertisements. The result, naturally, is the sometimes overlooking of the laudable.”

“ Ah ! if it were no worse than that ! ”

“ What, then ? ”

“ The impatience of the laudable, on the part of the few discerning, because, perhaps, aiming high, it hits below the mark. The true critic, I think, should exalt fine effort only less than fine achievement. But what does he too often do ? He passes on the cheap and meretricious, with a smile and shrug and some tolerant well-advertising phrases, to its popular and prosperous destiny, and reserves all his stultifying philippics for the works whose worth and high endeavour invite, but do not altogether satisfy, his serious notice.”

“ Surely, Mr. Herne——”

“ Surely, Mr. Leveson, *you* are not going to affect the cant that genuine worth should be superior to considerations of filthy lucre ? The finest artizan respects his art no less, but rather more, if he insists that high merit should command high prices. He demands these, and rightly, as the most practical form of homage to his work that a material world can conceive. Also, from the buyer’s point of view, if a man pays largely for a thing, he likes

to think that he has got value for his money. There is where the critic should come in."

"He should devote all his efforts, you mean, to enriching worth and impoverishing pretence. He should constitute himself a sort of art agent and adviser to the too-easily-gulled public?"

"That is exactly what I do mean."

Both men laughed together.

"With all respect for my kind," said Leveson, "I think you attribute too much power to its elbow. There are too few prophets in Judæa. Popular taste is not to be won to caviare by a few epicures preaching sturgeon."

"Nor certainly by those same epicures emphasising its rather forbidding peculiarities, or refraining from mentioning it at all."

"Well, I stand rebuked there"—He rose cheerily—"and will undertake to make the posthumous *amende-honorable*, if posthumous it is to be. But that's an impertinence." He looked over to Robin, who all this time had sat, the parrot on his knee, devouring the stranger with eyes and ears. "John Wisdom's youngster?" said he.

"A protégé of Herne's," answered Herne.

He had risen, too, a most bright friendliness in his eyes.

"You must forgive me all this nonsense," he said—"this flogging of a dead donkey. I have been generalising, I am afraid, from a particular instance; but the fellow was a friend of mine. What does it matter now. My excuse is, you made your visit the text. I hope you will let me see you again. You needn't go yet, need you?"

“I must. I’m not alone. There’s a lady waiting for me outside.”

“Why not ask——”

“No, it’s taboo. The truth is we came out for a walk together, and I inveigled her hither. She hadn’t known my direction, and when she learned it was horrified—thought you would imagine her intruding out of curiosity. The fact is she, too, is an admirer of John Wisdom—I wonder if it’s abusing a confidence to mention her name. You should know your—his friends, I think. Mrs. Owen Merrivale’s one of them.”

Herne paused an appreciable moment; then smiled.

“That hiatus,” said he, “looked like ill-manners, or conceit; but it wasn’t. Will you let me come and be introduced? Acton mentioned Mrs. Merrivale’s name, I think, as that of a fellow guest.”

“O, Acton!” said Leveson, with quite an impatient intonation. “Yes, to be sure, I had forgotten we owed this meeting to him.”

They went out together, the boy following unbid, and found Mrs. Merrivale standing by the fallen log. She looked nervous, and a little white over the introduction. Leveson, trusting to Herne’s persuasive geniality to reassure, and even embolden her, perhaps, to some quiet comment on his resolution, took Robin on ahead, leaving the others to follow. Herne and his companion strolled up the hill after them, for some paces in silence.

Suddenly she half turned to him.

“You wish really,” she said, “to be addressed by that name?”



"Quite really," he answered cheerfully. "Why not?"

She looked full at him for the first time, with her serious wondering eyes.

"I have no right to say," she answered. "But I should have thought John Wisdom had no reason to be ashamed of his own."

He glanced quickly at her, and away.

"I could remark," said he, "on a certain inconsequence there; but it might involve us in cross-purposes, which would be wearisome. You took an interest in him?"

"Yes, always."

"What a pity he didn't know. The man, I believe, came to think himself friendless. But now I recall: you described yourself as an old friend of his, meaning, I suppose, a kindly reader of his books?"

"Yes, of every one of them."

"No! Then you are his ideal critic. Most of the craft, to be sure, are wont to found their estimate of an author (we must presume he is an author worth an estimate, which, of course, John Wisdom may not have been) upon a study of such of his works as happen to have come their way—an arbitrary judgment, since artistic development must be traced through all its phases, if one would calculate the sum of its values. Where would Goldsmith, for instance, be classified by a critic who had read only his 'Animated Nature,' or Millais by one whose knowledge of his works was limited to the 'Disciple' and Sullivan's portrait? But why bother about the fellow? Here are you,

and here am I—in very good company, from my point of view, and not in the least to be troubled by the ghost of a dead reputation.”

She flicked a fallen leaf from her dress.

“I don’t like—O, pray forgive me!” she said—“I don’t like to hear you speak like that. It is justifying the creed of self-destruction.”

“A stoical creed, at least.”

“It may be; but I think it doesn’t win the sympathy of either gods or men.”

He did not answer.

“I had watched his career,” she went on presently, as if pleading. “I had admired so much the brave fight he was making in defence of his principles; and then——”

Her voice trembled a little on the last word, and she stopped. They had come into the ruined garden, and the house was before them.

“Haunted,” he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. “At least so the country believes. But what of that? Are not all houses and all men haunted?”

“What made you,” she said low, “choose such a neighbourhood?”

“Accident,” he answered—“pure accident. We happened to wander this way, and the place suited our mood and our means.”

She seemed to flush a little, biting her lip.

“*We?*” she murmured. She could not forbear the questioning emphasis.

“I and Robin Goodfellow,” he explained. “The boy is a protégé of mine. He was given to me at a very crucial pass, when, to speak truth, I

greatly needed a friend and comrade. He is the quaintest little oddity. I love him the best in the world."

"O, indeed!" she said. There was a cold implication in her voice of indifference to the subject, and she changed it. "Was it accident, also, that brought you to this remote part of the kingdom?"

"Not so entirely," he answered. "It was recommended to me by a lawyer, Mr. Raxworthy."

She turned quickly to resume her way.

"I must be going on, please," she said.

"— Not," he continued, quietly and oddly, "that, either in his recommendation or my choice, there was any suspicion of the agreeable company they were destined to bring me."

She did not answer, and hurried him on to join the two in front, who had paused at the entrance to the box alley. Leveson turned with a glowing face.

"'Tis a rare couple, this rogue and his parrot," said he. "I don't know which smacks the more sententious."

"Polly!" said the bird, very small and decided.

Leveson chuckled with laughter.

"Come, please," said Mrs. Merrivale; "we must really be getting back. No, not a step further, thanks. We can find our way perfectly well."

She bowed to Herne, and turned, passing by the boy without notice. Leveson shook hands with both. *Sans adieu, nous nous reverrons!* he cried, and went limping after his companion.



Herne hardly spoke a word, as he returned with Robin to their lodge. But the boy was more communicative.

“I like that Mr. Leveson,” he said. “He has such a nice roomy mind.”

## CHAPTER XV

HECTOR LEVESON reported so engagingly of the ex-author that Lady Woodroffe decided on the spot that she must invite him to "Bryntyddyn."

"'Tis the man's personality," said the critic. "It wins one through all his affectations of misanthropy. He can abjure the world very charmingly, it seems, for a Timon."

"He's not the first," sneered Currie, "to profit by his own incompetence by posing as a martyr to misunderstanding. He's on the way already, it appears, to force a negative sort of popularity. That shows more cleverness in the fellow than I have ever been able to discover in his books."

"I thought you didn't even know his name?" put in Mrs. Davenport-Pinto sweetly.

Currie scowled at the speaker, and hit the top of his egg a vicious whack with his spoon. Lady Woodroffe saw her opportunity, and sailed in.

"Nothing," she said, arch and smiling, "succeeds like failure."

"Bravo," cried Mrs. Davenport-Pinto. "I know a five-times bankrupt who's one of the richest men in London."

Leveson bided his time through the ensuing chatter.

“ I hope,” he said, when he was secure of attention, “ that you won’t misunderstand me. When I spoke of affected misanthropy, I meant the counterfeited pessimism of a fine spirit which, conscious of its gifts, has been persistently thrown back upon itself for appreciation. As a fact, the man who has written so sympathetically about human nature can hardly be thought serious in his sudden repudiation of it, stock and block.”

Acton laughed unpleasantly.

“ As to that,” he said, “ it occurs to me that Timon himself was a very charitable Johnny before he became a savage. But do for goodness’ sake let’s find another subject. If the man’s Timonising, as Mr. Currie thinks, to get himself talked about, he couldn’t have been favoured with a more accommodating visitor.”

Leveson ignored the impertinence ; but Mrs. Davenport-Pinto retorted :

“ It was you yourself first brought up his name, you know.”

“ Was it ? ” said Acton. “ Well, if I brought it up, I’m sick of it, and that’s about all.”

He sniggered at his own pleasantry ; but, finding it received coldly, went on with his kidney and bacon with a rather red face. If there is anything aggravating in this world, it is the passive implication of one’s inability to draw the line between good taste and bad. “ Hypocritical idiots ! ” he thought to himself.

Leveson turned to his hostess.

“ He chooses to call himself Herne,” he said. “ The why and wherefore are no concern of ours.



Only, as I am in a measure responsible for his introduction, I will ask your puissant ladyship, if you extend the honour of an invitation to him, to rule and command that his incognito be strictly respected by your subjects."

"I rule and command," said Lady Woodroffe.

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto nudged Mr. Batten, making him spill his coffee.

"Now don't you forget, Bat," she said. "You're not to pretend that you know Mr. Herne to be anything but himself."

"I protest," said the clergyman, edging away peevishly. "Equivocation is no weapon for a minister of the gospel. I shall be guided by circumstances."

"Well, and that's all we poor sinners ask of you," said the lady. "We're all in the same boat there, you know."

That afternoon Lady Woodroffe motored round by the road, and walked the rest of the way to Maenol-y-Neuadd to call upon Herne and Robin. She found them out, left cards, and, not waiting for return courtesies, followed up her visit the next day by a personal note, begging them to eschew formalities and to come to lunch on the morrow. Herne read the letter, with a comical face between dismay and resignation.

"We must accept, Robin," he said. "I don't want to pose as a notorious grievance; and if I don't go, I shall be a much more marked person than if I do. Perhaps, when they discover what uninteresting people we are, they'll leave us alone. What is the extent of the fashionable season, I

wonder? Maybe in a month or two we shall come into our own. In the meantime, I fear, we must do and suffer like orthodox gentlemen."

There was no fear of Robin's offending in that respect. He was the politest, most self-composed, little thoroughbred imaginable. Whatever his misfortunes, they had not impaired his manners. He was from the first no less at his ease than his companion—indeed rather more so, since, for all his independent philosophy, Herne could not altogether master his consciousness of the curiosity which underlay his reception. However, the party was informal, the good-humour plentiful, and Leveson a mine of tactfulness and resource. Lady Woodroffe was delighted with her visitors, and had them to sit one at each hand of her. She made a little embarrassment at the start by asking the boy his name. His answer, "Robin Goodfellow," caused a tiny flutter of amusement, which was a moment or two in subsiding; but the talk soon became general and merry. Mr. Batten, greatly infected by the occasion, and moved by it to a sort of pompous roguery, chuckled as he manipulated the dishes of cold saddle of mutton and of hot larded guinea-fowl which lay before him. His hostess affected the informal family lunch; and, as Mr. Batten was a family man, he was generally put to the heavy part of the carving, a duty which he accepted as a distinction, though his soul loathed it.

"Now, my little gentleman," he said presently to Robin, "what can I serve to you, sir? Is it to be—ah!—mut-mut or chickabiddywee?"

“Thank you, sir,” said Robin gravely. “I will take a little mutton.”

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto burst into such a fit of laughing that she came near to choke.

“O, Bat!” she said. “You *are* funny!”

“I fail,” said the clergyman, with a high manner of indignation, “to gather the source of your amusement.”

“Robin is older than he looks,” said Herne, addressing his hostess. “I don’t think you would take him to be over fourteen.”

“No!” answered Lady Woodroffe. “Do you hear that, Margaret?”

Mrs. Merrivale, who was sitting next to the boy, turned, a little coldly, and remarking, “he looks younger certainly,” resumed her conversation with her right-hand neighbour. But very soon she arose, and, pleading a slight headache, went out into the garden.

The talk drifted on, neither very wise nor very inane, but just such cheerful commonplaces as enliven the meetings of the majority. But whatever Herne contributed to them his hostess found curiously attractive. His picturesque habit of mind and catholicity of taste, his bright intelligent interest in the subject in hand, whether that might be the technology of golf, about which he knew nothing, or the “points” of a motor, on which his ignorance was bottomless, seemed to throw a glamour over his commonest observation. He had that rare natural gift of making whomsoever he spoke with feel him- or herself the one particularly welcome to him for the time being. His thin cheeks



smiled ; his eyes glittered. It was the personal magnetism of the creature flashing from the surface. Lady Woodroffe had had experience of many men in her day, but never before of this particular type, so caressing, so sympathetic in manner—almost like a girl—and yet so strong in his independence and so original in his misanthropy. And then there was the mystery enveloping him. What woman had failed to find a charm in that ? She was very much attracted, and genuinely, to the little white solemn-eyed boy. A suspicion that he might be contraband goods—something “a little more than kin and less than kind” to the other—rather added to her interest in him. Her training and temperament regarded such affinities with a romantic indulgence. Marriage in her eyes was only a “trust” security, from which Love, as a speculative investment, was legally excluded. The wise woman in her had been enough to scotch, but not to kill, her impressionability.

Naturally, some time during the meal, the talk turned upon the popular craze over “limericks,” and, naturally, one or two interested had something to say about the injustice of the awards, each, as it turned out, having known a friend, or friends, who had supplied a tag, or tags, vastly wittier than, and superior to, the published specimens.

“What are you to expect ?” said Lady Woodroffe soothingly to the complainants. “In an age of sweated labour it is natural that the cheap thought should be the favoured one.”

That was very truly said ; and indeed, to do

her justice, Lady Woodroffe had always, unless under extreme pressure, set her face against the overtime working of dressmakers' apprentices.

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto nudged the clergyman who sat next to her.

"Now then, Bat," she whispered, "this is *your* subject."

Mr. Batten seemed to think so.

"Have you ever, sir," he said, looking round her to Herne, "contributed your mite to these popular contests?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Herne.

"O!" said the clergyman. "The thing may be overdone, I opine, especially when it seeks to embody the essentially frivolous and ephemeral in a form which is designed to challenge comparison with the monuments of permanent literature."

"Good gracious!" whispered a young lady to her companion. "Would you believe he's talking about the Book of Nonsense!"

"While on the subject of cheap thoughts," continued Mr. Batten, "may I ask, sir, if you, as one interested, are an advocate of cheap literature for the multitude?"

A little stir of apprehension passed through the company; but Herne answered with perfect self-possession and good-nature:

"I think not. Cheap literature means a cheap estimate of it. Things easily acquired are things lightly valued. They fail to impress or educate in the inevitable crush of competition. Besides, the living labourer is worthy of his hire, and cheap literature means the sweating of the labourer.

You needn't pay the price if you don't value his work. The best of all art should be held attainable only by those who think it worth an appreciable sacrifice—say a brace of grouse or a saddle of mutton. You can get all the rest you want in your penny newspaper. No, I am dead against cheap literature—until a man becomes a Classic.”

Currie, growling in his beard, could not forbear an explosion.

“I don't agree with you. The more the ass is sweated, the sooner his extinction—a blessing for us all.”

“Except for the critics,” said Herne, smiling. “I doubt if there are enough geniuses to go round with them.”

“Cheap Classics!” continued Currie. “The Classics are what should command the fancy prices, like all other fine antiques. For my part I never read a modern book, a novel especially, that's worth its fraction of the guinea I pay to a lending library.”

“Not even for its style?” put in Acton. “Think what a precious commodity that is nowadays.”

“Style!” snarled the other—“artificial gloss on shoddy, to impose on the ignorant! Who among the giants ever gave a thought to it?”

“I could name a few,” said Leveson quietly—“‘assiduous apes,’ according to the petted phrase. There were Pope, Dryden, Thackeray, Addison, Shakespeare, to take a chance handful. You declaim against your better sense, Currie. Elemental forces are never so coherent in themselves that they



can impress an artificial society without the aid of art. What man, even one of your giants, ever yet wrote as he talked, or talked as he wrote? Form out of chaos is surely the text-word of all art; and what is style but form?"

"If it isn't bad form," said Currie sulkily.

Lady Woodroffe turned, her eyes very bright, to Herne.

"I think I fully agree with you as to the mistake of cheap literature," she said. "If its present prices were raised instead of lowered, what a clearance of rubbish there would be!"

"I expect I should go into the dust-cart," said Shipley good-humouredly.

"I, too, am of your opinion, Lady Woodroffe," said Mr. Batten. "The destinies of authors of a serious aim would cease to be confounded with meaner ones."

"Ah!" said Leveson. "You like a good living, Mr. Batten. So do I. Literature, like the Church, depends for its prestige upon the dignity of large endowments. Its great days were the days of great salaries paid to authors. Dickens, at the present rates, would be writing for the popular weeklies, and gaining an immense reputation among servant-girls."

They rose, as he spoke, and there was a general movement for the smoking-room or gardens. Lady Woodroffe turned an ostentatious cold shoulder upon both Acton and the critic of the *Weekly Censor*.

"I shouldn't like to be a writer of imagination in these days," she said, pretty audibly. "Some-

thing in them seems to have given us very bad taste."

Leveson waited until they were outside. Then he said :

"I make no reflections or allusions, my dear young lady ; but if imagination throws its Arcadia open to the public, it must expect to suffer some abuse of its privileges. The hooligan will get in with the law-abider."

"Imagination, I suppose," she said, "must eat. Come, Robin."

She took the boy all over the gardens ; picked him a beautiful nosegay ; showed him her pets, and constituted him himself the latest and best of them. She made him promise to come again, subtle creature, and promised for her part to call and be introduced to Ferdinand. He left her quite in love with him, and he with her.

That same night she wrote to London for a complete set of John Wisdom's works, to be forwarded to "Bryntyddyn" without delay.

## CHAPTER XVI

WHETHER or not women exist on paradox, as Mr. Perceval Acton declared, it is certain that some contradictory elements went to the making of Margaret Merrivale's individuality. From a certain sweetly impassive quality in her beauty, from her unpregnant silences and soft wondering regards, one would instinctively have placed her among those pretty witless souls, whose natural loving-kindness is their chief wisdom, and to whose waists, in a responsiveness as kind, and with the most sympathetic decorum in the world, one always feels moved to give a little affectionate hug, as expressing the one form of eloquence which to their owners shall be plain and unequivocal. Dear down cushions of women are these, who seem shaped to be rested on in an understanding that needs no words—women whom one pictures dreaming and smiling by nursery fires, and brooding abstract benevolences. They are lacking in a sense of humour; and so, perhaps, was Mrs. Merrivale. Nothing approximating sharpness can be associated with them; but there, undoubtedly, she contradicted her type. She had a very bright intelligence of her own, though she kept it put away as a rule in cotton-wool and lavender. She had read a good deal; written, we know, a little; observed much,



and lived more than her placid exterior denoted. But the basis of her nature was fondness. She cherished her soul, as, under other circumstances, she might have the life within her, in a jealous secrecy. The thoughts of it, the loves of it, were home-keeping children. She was shy of letting them out into the world, to coarsen, perhaps, by contact with it.

I don't know if she was liked by her own sex. Reticence may come from stupidity or shyness ; it has an air, nevertheless, of conscious superiority ; and, as a desire for *social* superiority is the only sort of superior desire which an average woman ever feels in herself, or resents in another, it followed, or may have followed, that Mrs. Merrivale's sex was resentful of her reticence. Stupidity must reveal itself soon enough to intimacy, and intimacy found her quite self-possessed in intelligence. Shyness, on the other hand, wears a thousand masks, and those are more difficult to penetrate. For how much misunderstanding shyness alone is responsible in the world is simply incalculable. To the end, Lady Woodroffe could never satisfy herself as to whether Mrs. Merrivale was shy or consequential. Very likely a man, say Hector Leveson, could have told her in his first half-hour of friendly confidence with the reticent one.

Yet the women were intimates, and, by Lady Woodroffe's fond request, Mayed and Margareted one another in the most familiar fashion. Naturally communicative herself in a high degree, Lady Woodroffe could not forbear taking holiday sometimes from the tax she had put on her tongue.

Occasionally, in the sanctuary of her boudoir, she would expand into volubility, though certainly, in the case of Mrs. Merrivale, to a tiresomely unresponsive listener.

It was the morning after Herne's visit, and the two were seated alone together in the cosiest room imaginable, Margaret reading on a sofa, May at the open window, painting a little water-colour of the view it commanded. It was an extensive view—one, possibly, which an artist of distinction might have found too richly incommunicable; but amateurs rush in where professionals fear to tread. Lady Woodroffe, attired in the most enviable *negligée*, would pause from time to time, the brush raised in her white hand, to regard her work with critical satisfaction before adding to it an extra touch of that wooliness which reconciles all discrepancies. She made a very pretty and graceful figure as she sat, contrasting curiously in her slowness, lithe and *spirituelle*, with the more slumberous pulchritude of her friend. They suggested nothing so much as a couple of patrician pussies, short-haired and Persian, elastic and flocculent, each a telling foil to the other.

“Margaret,” said Lady Woodroffe suddenly; “are you an advocate, as Mr. Batten would say, of matrimony?”

She put her head on one side, as she spoke, appreciating a last touch of her brush. The pose, suggestive of semi-abstraction, failed to convince the feminine mind. Mrs. Merrivale recognised in it on the instant a ruse to divert suspicion from what was, in its secret intent and design, a piece

of special-pleading. She looked over the top of her book, not answering for a moment. Something, vaguely suspected and resented, shadowed itself out in her mind, already, perhaps, particularly sensitive to a particular order of impression. There are premonitions of other occurrences than death in life, and it is possible for the soul to take alarm over antagonisms which have not even as yet realised their own existence. She was already armoured and prepared, as she answered, with a surprised smile :

“ What an overwhelming question ! ”

“ No, but are you ? ” persisted the other, holding her sketch at an effective angle. “ You have had experience, you know.”

It was the first time she had ever ventured to touch on a delicate subject. One had to form one's own opinion as to whether a late desperate curiosity, or a certain sense of urgency, were her excuse.

“ Have I ? ” said Mrs. Merrivale quietly.

“ My dear child,” cried the other, with a silvery laugh ; “ let us play up to our parts by all means where the public is concerned. ‘ Hattitude’s heverythink ! ’ as that dreadful fiddling clown used to remark, when he cut a contortion and brought down the house. But there come blessed intervals when we are excused from taking people in, and then it is a joy to laugh and cry, and open our real human hearts to one another.”

“ I daresay ; but I have never taken people in.”

“ O ! haven’t you ? *Honi soit* and the ceteras,



I suppose. But silence is a very good substitute for fibbing now and again."

"What do you mean, please, May?"

"What do I mean, says she! Why, of course, that the less I talk about myself, the more you'll respect me."

"I do respect you."

"Fiddlededee! Do you know, Mrs. Margaret, what I was before I became what I am?"

Mrs. Merrivale put down her book definitely.

"You were an actress, were you not?"

Lady Woodroffe threw away her brush, and rose. She listened a moment, laughed, lifted her skirts, trilled out a little soft solfeggio in the most flexible, most bird-like of voices, and kissed her fingers to an imaginary audience.

"The Duke" (she sang) "has a weskit of flowered silk;  
The Earl has one of brocade;  
But Benjamin Styles has the ladies' smiles,  
When he walks in the Church Parade."

And then she danced, tripping a fairy maze, her toes hardly brushing the pile of the carpet. It was delicious—a daintiest rhythmical recovery from the poetry of her dead past—the best it could offer. She stopped in a moment, brilliant and sparkling, and put a finger to her lips.

"Hush!" she panted—"an actress—that sort. Do you know what it could command? Properly exploited, anything from a Chicago millionaire to an English Coronet. I played it for all it was worth—and here I am."

She ran and stood before the other.

“How dare you,” she said, “thank God that you are not like me, you sleek Pharisee of a woman?”

“I never said a word like it. What a strange mood you are in.”

“I am as good as you, I tell you, and I was tempted, which you never were. Respectability was yours by right; but I, though I am as honest a woman as yourself, had to fight every inch of my way to gain it. Love, which you and yours start out by demanding, never entered into my calculations at all. It would have meant the ruin of all the rest. You can't conceive it in that light, of course! It always came dressed for you in Sunday-go-to-meetings. How do you orthodox women come to grief with your husbands? I could have kept mine on a pennorth of love a week, if he had only given it me as an equal. What were you doing—” breathless she dropped on the sofa by Margaret's side, and gave her a little impatient grip—“what were you doing to let yours go from you?”

Mrs. Merrivale drew a thought away, very kindly but very decidedly.

“Ah!” cried Lady Woodroffe—“I understand. It was very improper of me to ask that, I suppose—plebeian assurance. The veil is not to be desecrated by such as I. What a nun was spoilt in you, Margaret! Levez Saint Joseph!”

“I never dreamt of such a thing.”

“Levez Saint Joseph!”

“It is not nice of you to call me a snob.”

“Levez Saint Joseph!”

“O, I don't know in the least what you mean!”

“A story I was once told, my dear, that’s all. It will shock you probably. It was about a sister in a French Convent who had to be operated on for something or other. When the doctor came, he found her lying alone, completely covered over with holy pictures, on a couch. He was standing dumb-stricken, when a voice from behind a curtain whispered to him, ‘Levez Saint Joseph!’ That was all the poor man had to direct him. One would fancy that delicacy could go no farther, unless one happened to touch on a Mrs. Merrivale’s matrimonial affairs.”

Margaret pleaded a little, in distress.

“I can’t help it. I never speak about it to any one. Don’t think me ungenerous, May.”

“Ungenerous!” cried her friend. “Of course I think you ungenerous. What are you returning me for all my wild confidences?”

“I will respect them with my whole heart—indeed I will?”

“I know that you will. Don’t you love a secret? But you won’t”—she seized the other’s arm again—“tell me,” she said—“you might tell me—you shall tell me—just so much—were you in love with the man you married?”

Mrs. Merrivale sat like a figure of wax.

“Ah!” cried Lady Woodroffe, and flung away her arm. “You won’t answer my question, I see. You wouldn’t break the littlest vow of silence to save a soul from torture. What a saintly person you are, Margaret.”

“That is very unkind,” said Mrs. Merrivale, a little unsteadily. “I think you might know that



I am not such a churl that I would refuse to show you the way to happiness, if I knew it myself."

"You don't, then?"

Lady Woodroffe had turned away, and, her chin leaned on her hand, was frowning into vacancy.

"So I rather supposed," she murmured, as if pre-occupied. "Yet there *are* some happy married people. Perhaps it depends on a community of tastes and holding the same social position. Well, I'm a 'pro,' and 'pros' of all sorts must be more or less on the same level, and more or less in sympathy with one another."

She fell silent; and then Mrs. Merrivale, speaking with a little tremble in her voice, ventured her question.

"You are so odd to-day, May. What is the matter with you? I could almost believe, from the way you talk, that you were contemplating an end to your widowhood."

Lady Woodroffe turned about, with a tiny mocking laugh.

"Very ingeniously suggested. O, you sly creature! Heigho! Well, the fellows are a puzzling lot, aren't they, my dear?"

The manner of her confidential allusions to the other sex was generally disagreeable to her friend. There was a commonness latent in it which spoke of a not quite obliterated past.

"But, perhaps," she said, "if we're to get near them at all, it must be in our own class."

"Actors, do you mean?"

"You insulting thing!—but I do mean it; or

their equivalents, say, such as musicians, or painters, or authors."

"Their equivalents! Surely you are not ranking——"

"Well? Go on."

"No; it was nothing. I didn't intend——"

"You did intend. Do you take me for a fool, Margaret? Well, if there *is* such a distance between us, don't you think a title is enough to bridge it over?"

Mrs. Merrivale rose.

"Are you thinking of marrying a musician, or a painter, or an author?" she said, with a rather stiff smile.

Lady Woodroffe jumped to her feet.

"I'm not thinking," she said, "of anything so definite; but I'm thinking, nevertheless. I'm thinking of a hundred things, Margaret—of my real deserts and insufficient rewards. I'm thinking of Lady Woodroffe, the variety artiste who married a lord for her fair name's sake, and who sacrificed to her honest determination to be respectable at all costs a world of natural passions and desires. I'm thinking of women whose sweet and homely destinies find and leave them contented with the natural perquisites of their unexigent lot—a good fellow for husband, pretty children, and family devotion all round—and I'm thinking how much better off they are than I am, for all my wealth and wisdom. I'm thinking that I fought hard and valiantly—yes, I did—for something less than would satisfy the least of these humble ones, and—it's not fair, it's not fair!"

Some strange unwonted emotion was obviously rising in her fast and strong. Her brow was contracted ; her eyes were suddenly thick with tears. All in a moment she had taken a hasty step, and thrown herself upon the other, winding her arms convulsively about her neck.

“ I want to be a wife and mother—I want to be a wife and mother ! ” she cried ; and quite broke down.

Mrs. Merrivale would have been something less than a woman, something much less than herself, not to soothe and respond. Nevertheless, it seemed, she had to put some force upon herself to do so. Her manner was involuntarily chilling, her actions mechanical.

“ I am so sorry,” she said ; and could only repeat, “ I am so sorry ” ; but there was no spontaneous sympathy or reassurance in her tones ; they would not have convinced a child.

Very soon the other drew away, and wiped her eyes.

“ There,” she said—“ so am I. But I couldn’t help it—any port in a storm.”

She went to the window, and, turning her sketch over and over, presently spoke there, when the heaving of her bosom would allow her.

“ What a fool you must think me ! I used to be taken like this sometimes between the acts. It’s something just to be humoured and forgotten. It was only your ill-luck that you happened to be in the way. You’ll forget it, won’t you, Margaret ?

Mrs. Merrivale did not answer. Suddenly the other broke into an hysterical laugh.



“ You can’t bring yourself to tell a lie, of course,” she cried. “ There—if you don’t mind leaving me to myself a little—please, Margaret.”

“ Of course, if you wish it,” answered her friend ; and very quietly, with a pained white face, went out of the room.

## CHAPTER XVII

HERNE and Robin Goodfellow returned home from "Bryntyddyn" by way of the road. They had hardly descended into it, when they came upon Mrs. Owen Merrivale, her parasol over her head, stooping to pick some flower by the hedge-side. She rose, and bowed to them slightly; but Herne accosted her. Robin noticed that her face was rather pale; and, like the little grave gentleman he was, asked her if her headache were any better. She did not even answer him, which he thought uncourteous; but his manners were not to be impaired by a snub. He waited on the will of his elders without further comment.

"I didn't know," said Herne. "I was wondering why you slipped out so suddenly."

"Were you?" she said. "It was good of you to interest yourself in me."

"*Pois pour fève*," he answered, with a laugh—"a small return for the interest you have confessed in a friend of mine. But I hope the pain has gone?"

"Yes," she said—"that one has."

He looked at her kindly.

"This liberal air is the best medicine for all. Are you strolling our way?"

She hesitated, glancing at the boy. Robin Bayard stirred and smiled to Herne.

"If you are going to walk slowly," he said, "I will stop behind and pick some grasses to put with my flowers."

Herne nodded, and the two moved on without him. For some distance no word was uttered between them. Mrs. Merrivale seemed to wish to speak, but to find a difficulty in beginning. Her face flushed, and went pale, and flushed again. At length, with a strong effort, she broke the silence.

"An old friend—you remember the other day—what I said? Mayn't I call myself so?"

"Of John Wisdom's?" he asked. She bit her lip. "As his intimate, or apologist, or advocate, or what you will," he said, "I thank you with real gratitude."

She looked at him gravely.

"It is to be really that way, then?" she said—"now and always?"

He considered a moment.

"Don't you think it is best?" His manner was quite frank. "It makes things so much easier, to discuss him, if you wish to, impersonally."

"Very well," she said. "Perhaps it does. And you are to be Mr. Herne?"

"If you please."

"What pleases you shall please me."

"Then we shall get on famously."

"Mr. Herne—pray forgive my asking—are you here, on your friend's commission, to gather material for a fresh book by him?"

He shook his head.



“That is all over—so far as he is concerned. If I am gathering material, it is for Robin yonder.”

She half turned her head, and gave a little shrug to her shoulders.

“An author too ? ”

“A potential one, I do hope and believe. If he realises himself, he will go further than John Wisdom ever looked.”

She laughed, a little coldly.

“A paragon, to be sure. But the grown lion is a more interesting subject to me.”

“You haven’t found him out then, like most people ? He must be careful not to bray in your presence.”

Her feet moved faster for a few paces. Something seemed to impel her to action.

“Why will you speak like that ? ” she said. “If you can, and mean it, I think you don’t deserve to succeed. Have you lost faith in yourself ? ”

Involuntarily he overlooked his part.

“As a money-getter,” he said. “Not a tittle otherwise.”

She did not answer ; but her silence was eloquent.

“You see, the publishers expect you to justify them in *their* faith in you,” he explained. “It is really not so pusillanimous as it looks.”

That appeared to be a new point of view to her.

“But it does not excuse the lion’s skin,” she said.

He laughed.

“Excuse it this way, then,” he answered—“that Wisdom, or John Wisdom, is a ‘hass’ to the many-headed.”

“Thank you, at least, for not including me amongst them.”

He glanced at her oddly.

“A really subtle compliment, Mrs. Merrivale. Do you know—pray don’t accept it in an invidious sense—you are rather a surprise to me.”

“How do you mean?”

“I should never have taken you for an unconventional woman, holding views about form and style, and all that sort of thing—in literature, I mean.”

“O! Why not?”

“I really can’t define—a sum of impressions, I suppose, founded on a study of types. The face is so often an index, that one is led into generalising by it.”

She looked down, as they walked, smiling faintly.

“Of course,” she said, “that means that you are surprised to find that I am not quite so silly as I look.”

“Ah!” he answered. “As you choose to make the challenge, you shall hear the truth. There are men who cannot dissociate intellect and beauty in a woman’s face. The latter without the former cannot exist for them. It is simply animal—insipid. To me, I think, it is the more lovable type, because it is the nearer to a perfect expression of nature. It speaks of the healthy mind in the healthy body; it looks with clear straight eyes; it will not have its plain issues of existence confounded for it by sophists and theorists.”

“And what are its plain issues?”

“You are to admit for me. Are they not honest

love and honest marriage ; the domestic amenities ; strong men and lusty babies ? ”

“ Certainly, I admire masterfulness and determination in a man.”

“ You like men to succeed in what they undertake ? ”

“ Yes, I am sure I do.”

“ There is the puzzle, you see. What has success to do with endeavour, however persistent ? ”

“ Everything, I think. O, Mr. Herne ! think of Sir John Moore and Corunna—think of Sir Richard Grenville fallen dying on the little ship he had fought so long and so vainly to save from the Spaniards. Wasn’t he successful ? ”

He was silent a little space ; then he looked at her plaintively.

“ Think,” he said, “ of Keats, slandered and neglected, dying in Rome ; and of the love, on which he had exhausted the last fires of his soul, accommodating itself with a more practical partner elsewhere. You women, women of your type, are all the same. From the bloodshedders, the strong men of the sword, the practical conquerors of their kind, you always draw your illustrations of manliness. It may not appear conceivable to you that this poor unself-parading fellow, this Grub Street hack, with his mighty aspirations and empty pockets, can possibly have foes to fight in his dismal garret far more formidable than those which your soldier sets out to tackle, with the drums beating and the fine eyes weeping all about him.”

She glanced up, and down, her lip trembling a little.



“I do not think that that is very kind or very true,” she said; “and, if you are quoting Sir Richard against me, he belongs to literature as much as to history.”

“Yes,” he answered grimly; “and Tennyson was an e-normous success.”

But, in the moment of his bitterness, the sweetness of his nature prevailed.

“O, I am a rude advocate!” he said. “You mustn’t judge John Wisdom by the ill-manners of his counsel.”

“I shall judge him,” she said—she looked steadily before her, and her eyes were a thought filmy—“I should like to judge him always as I should judge the brave soldier, who refuses to recognise when he is beaten.” She turned to him suddenly, with her lovely face all kindling. “O!” she said—“do you not remember—have you never read—those words that Soult said to Napoleon on the morning of Waterloo? The Emperor, you know, when the dawn broke, and he saw our troops, which he had feared might escape him in the night, still awaiting him, rubbed his hands in glee. But Soult shook his head. ‘You do not know these English as I do,’ he said. ‘They will die before they yield the ground they stand on.’ That story always puts me in a glow. It is what we Englishwomen like to think of our men.”

“Our men!” she checked herself in a panic, and hung her head. Herne seemed to think a long while, as they walked on together. Presently he heaved a profound sigh.

“O!” he said suddenly; “I find myself, as an

advocate, in a tight place. I think I must be moving deeper into the wilderness."

She stopped, with a little breathless sound, and put a hand instinctively on his arm.

"Because?" she began, with startled eyes; and gulped and paused. "O, you will not so mistake and punish me!" she whispered.

He signed to her to come on, because the boy was following. He was very much moved and perplexed.

"Are you really so interested in this case?" he said presently. "Well, Destiny rules success out of some men's lives. It is so patent, in instances that could be quoted, that to preach a change of luck for them is to insult the gods. But the success or ill-success of qualities has nothing to do with their intrinsic values, and the ill-starred soul may make a profitable bequest of the goods which have always remained lumber on his own hands. If I have a poor little mantle—if you are convinced that I have—help me to transfer it to the shoulders of Robin yonder, who will come to wear it with a much better grace than I."

Her hand slipped from his arm, on which he had lightly secured it by placing his own hand above.

"That is only to beg the question," she said in a chill disappointed voice. "Fancy Sir Richard, in the middle of the fray, handing over his sword to a cabin-boy, because the boy was fresh and unwounded!"

He broke into a laugh over the parallel.

"O, believe me, you wrong little Robin!" he said. "He is far more fit to take command than

I am. If he had at the first, he would have sunk all the Spanish galleons by this time, and sailed home to a title and a royal pension. You shall hear him tell a story extempore."

She wanted to say nay, but dared not. She was afraid he might use her hostility as a further text for the removal of company so uncongenial to her out of her neighbourhood. In the panic of the thought she even fawned a little, sheathing her ready claws after the fashion of her sex.

"What an odd little creature he must be," she said—"and certainly attractive in his appearance. I hope you aren't mistaken in him. So many of these infant phenomenons fail to realise their early promise ; and——"

"And where did you pick him up ? " The question was on the tip of her tongue to ask ; but the loyal woman in her revolted timely against the subterfuge. She admired this man so much, had so built up her estimate of him on the basis of the clean and natural morality which his books, through all their strangeness, had seemed to preach, that she could not and would not imply any question of his truth and honour through an equivocation. She knew perfectly well how "Bryntyddyn" regarded the connection. But what was sport to "Bryntyddyn" was death to her. She had not yet reached the point when, from a present failure of her hero of the pen to reach to her ideals, she could argue his general moral laxity. She flattered her imagination, rather, with a warm and glowing dream of a strong soul reinvigorated, recheered to battle, through her own inspiring sympathy. The



dream made her heart beat and her cheek flush. There was no place in it for this childish intruder. That was not, so she insisted to herself, because of a vulgar innuendo, but because of the man's self-stultifying infatuation about the boy, which must balk all her hopes for the former so long as it ruled paramount. She was jealous *for* her hero, not *of* his protégé. And yet she was jealous—it hardly matters why. A fever is a fever, whether it be caught from a man or a baby ; and the strength of its deliriums bears no proportion whatever to the source of its infection.

“They are over-trained,” said Herne—“sapped and worn out before their time. I don't intend to be a nigger-driving impresario. Robin shall keep me in my old age.”

“Do you mean that you will train him in order to live upon him ? ”

“I will train him to make money. I know already how not to, and that is half his education prepared.”

“Is money, then, the sole end of your ambition ? ”

“Why not ? Are you sure you realise its ethical as well as its practical uses ? To make money is to be independent of the tyranny of money. Poverty cripples and falsifies all our natural human virtues. The poor man can never be generous without rebuke, or unfortunate without slander, or frank without impertinence. He must be on his perpetual guard not to appear a suitor or a sycophant. Riches set one's moral nature free ; manumit the shackled soul ; permit one to be oneself, quit for ever of the odious suspicion of flunkeyism. I speak what I

know. I was the son of rich parents. If their wealth had descended to me, there would have been no question of certain compromises with life and love, which poverty forced me into making.”

They had turned off the road into the track which led up towards Maenol-y-Neuadd. Mrs. Merrivale, walking and breathing rather hurriedly, seemed hardly to have realised the change in their direction.

“Love ! ” she whispered. “ I did not know—I did not mean—what has love to do with money ? ”

He laughed, a little bitterly.

“ Nothing, of course. We learn it inversely every day. But still the poor lover is no nearer the rich heiress.”

She stopped quite suddenly, and looked about her in a bewildered way.

“ Where are we ? ” she said. “ I must go back. I don’t know where we are.”

“ In a very uncalled-for situation,” he answered. He was himself again on the instant, frank and whimsical. “ No, now you have walked so far you must come on and see our house—you really must. You are not going to punish me for using the freedom of an old friend, such as you allowed me to call myself, by touching on grievances which are best forgotten.”

She still had a stunned look in her eyes ; but when he moved on, she moved mechanically beside him. Her brain was topsy-turvy. She had a feeling as if some shock had suddenly overturned all its furniture, and she were staring in at a hopeless confusion. Presently she said, almost in a whisper :

“ You wanted to make money—in order that you might come to stand on equal terms with—— ? ”

She stopped suddenly, her cheeks a vivid pink. Her companion cleared the situation with a laugh.

“ O, don’t trouble your head with what I wanted—the moon amongst other things. It is shameful of me to be so presuming on a purely literary interest. Look ; there is our asylum from the world ! Isn’t it a subject for a Christmas card ? Our particular hermitage lies a little away and above to the left. You needn’t fear for the proprieties. Edwin doesn’t live alone there. Even if Angelina should come his way, there are Robin and Ferdinand to save the situation. But these ‘ poetical justices ’ don’t come to happen in our time.”

She did not and could not answer him by a single word. She was struggling to gather a clue to his mood out of the chaos of her mind. Only one thing there stood clear to her—the character of her own face. If it was not an intellectual face, what then ? He had admitted it was of the type he preferred. Had the woman he loved possessed such a face ? What mattered a lack of any particular quality in its expression, if it was beautiful to the man whose good opinion she must have valued most in the world ? A storm of emotions was surging under that exterior serenity of hers. Old dreamings, old passionings, long shrunk and dried at their spring-head in her heart, seemed to rise afresh and flood her being, so that her flesh became a conscious shame to her. Now and again, as they



walked on in silence, she would steal a swift glance at her companion, and take to her heart all those points in him which were most appealing to her sex—his hectic colour and greying hair; the strong sweetness and gentleness of his expression; his air of patient defeat. Yet, at the same time, she deplored that same patience, that same surrender. She felt a longing to take his head to her bosom, and soothe him to rest; and enter, with all her desires of and for him, into his dreams; and so see him awake again, the conqueror and master of her own inspiring. And, while she thought, he led her up to the little old pump-house, and made her welcome, with a grandiloquent flourish.

“Such as it is, fair lady, accept it at least for the abode of innocence and virtue.”

Somehow, absurd as it seemed, she was glad to hear him put it that way. It may have been due to her lack of humour, but it satisfied her concept of his intrinsic goodness. He introduced Ferdinand to her in proper form. The old parrot had reconciled himself philosophically to his change of life and locality. Very few things could startle him in a world whose surprises he had already exhausted when in the egg. A paradoxical thing about a parrot is that he is born old. He has pondered vast problems in his shell, before ever deciding to break it and claim his superannuation pension of a prodigy-admiring race. When at length he issues, it is with the gait and temper of a gouty professor. He is a survival, not a birth. His nose is from the first more Roman than the Classics. He has a nut-cracker face, evolved about all those hard nuts of

philosophy which he has been engaged in cracking before ever he tasted a living kernel. His sardonic fits of laughter, his sly tauntings of the family cat, his "scratch-head" stoopings to lure one off one's guard and get a good snap at one's finger, are all so many evidences of his senile pleasantries. See him pause, with a maize berry in his fist and his head akimbo, to take insulting stock of one. "Of us two fools," he clearly says, "which is the greater—you, with your ridiculous borrowed plumes, or I, with my natural feathers?"

When Mrs. Merrivale sought to ingratiate herself with Ferdinand, he uttered, I am afraid, an oath. Robin, coming in at the moment, rebuked him. He hung his head, pretending penitence, but wishing now that he had taken a bite instead of answering at all. She turned from both him and his master, affecting an amusement which, I fear, she did not feel.

"It is all beautifully clean and tidy," she said, looking about the room—"not the usual male *cahotage*. But somehow I should have expected it of you."

"Am I to take that as a compliment?" asked Herne.

She turned to him very sweetly.

"You are to take it as a compliment to your consistency, at least," she said. "I looked for style in your ménage, and I have found it."

"O! style?"

"Is not style form, and form order, and order cleanliness? It would have disappointed me to find you a sloven."

He laughed ; but not quite easily. The approval seemed charged somehow with a hint of femininity.

“ Come here, Robin,” he said. “ I am exploiting my household, you see, and I want you, if you will, to tell us a story.”

But the boy, conscious of an unsympathetic audience, hung back reluctant.

“ Must I, Herne ? ” he said.

That was so unlike him, that his comrade paused in the act of placing a chair for the visitor.

“ Of course not, sonny,” he said. “ Was there ever such a word between us ? ”

Robin flushed up to his hair.

“ I will try,” he said. “ Please let me, if Mrs. Merrivale won't mind its badness.”

The woman, with her heart rebelling, expressed her pleasure. Robin came and stood in the middle of the floor, and, after his wont, sought inspiration of the window. It framed a glowing picture of sun and trees, and a little group of peasants talking together beyond the woodside. Perhaps that gave him his suggestion ; for presently he began :

“ There was once a curiously strange artist, and he painted such very strange pictures. Some, who saw them, said that they were the most impudent frauds ; but others believed this artist to be the greatest genius in the world. A man, who was also a critic, wanted to find out the truth for himself, so he called at the artist's studio ; but the artist was out. He said he would wait for him, and he waited, going round the walls where a number of pictures were hanging. There were landscapes, and faces, and things being done by people ; but the



critic thought them all very unsatisfying, though strange, and he wondered what his admirers found so exquisite. They were good, but they all wanted something. They seemed trying to tell things, as we struggle to tell things in dreams when our voices will not come. Presently he saw a scroll on the wall, and on it was written, '*We are what we think ourselves ; and what we think ourselves, other people think us ; and what other people think us, we think ourselves.*' And while he was pondering this amused, the artist came in. And he took the critic round the walls for the second time ; and, lo ! as he exhibited his own works, the faces sprang into life, the figures began to move and the winds to blow, and the studio seemed full of the sounds of a far little world, with anvils ringing, and sheep-bells tinkling, and people calling to one another among the trees. And then the critic understood the scroll, and that all art lives by sympathy.

“ And shortly afterwards this strange artist died, and it was reported that he had left a very strange picture, unfinished, on his easel—the last he had been at work on. And the critic went to see it ; and he wondered, waiting for it to speak. There were many figures there ; and they were all looking at something in their midst ; but what that something was no one might tell, for there was a perfectly blank space where it should have been. And in the eyes of all the figures was great emotion expressed—some of terror, some of rapture, some of great comfort, and some of despair. But nobody was certain, or agreed about a single figure, or could guess in the least what the thing in the middle

was to have been. But the critic fixed his eyes upon those of a sad woman in the picture ; and he thought ‘ If I look long enough she will tell me, for the thought of the artist must be reflected there, even like an image in a glass.’ And as he looked——”

The boy broke off suddenly, and whipt round.

“ There is Mr. Acton,” he said, “ going up the hill.”

Herne uttered a curse under his breath, walked to the door, looked out, and came back.

“ Never mind him,” he said. “ What was it the critic came to see, Robin ? ”

But Mrs. Merrivale had risen hurriedly.

“ Thank you very much,” she said. “ It was a wonderful story, and beautifully told. But I must really be getting back now.”

Herne saw her down the hill. She seemed nervous, and a trifle agitated.

“ Isn’t he a marvel ? ” he said. “ Did you observe the psychologic truism ? . Where he gets it all from Heaven only knows.”

“ O ! don’t *you* ? ” she said, with a little chilly smile. “ I should have thought the parrot might have taught you.”

“ No,” he said firmly. “ There you are quite mistaken.”

She did not want to dispute with him at the last moment. She gave him her hand, and let him hold it a little.

“ We are to be friends always ? ” she said softly.

“ Always,” he answered. “ Will you come and see me again ? ”

A little thrill answered in her to the exclusive "me."

"I don't know," she answered with a smile. "There are eavesdroppers abroad, you see."

"In Arcady," he said. "How funny it seems that we must regard them. You don't want me to see you back, I suppose?"

"No, please."

They parted. Herne was more kind than ever to Robin that evening.

"Never to be separated, whatever betide—are we, little sonny?" he said.



## CHAPTER XVIII

A BATCH of "recent fiction" had come down for Mrs. Davenport-Pinto to review for the *Happy Despatch*. She settled to her task one wet morning, rather glad of the distraction. There may have been half-a-dozen novels in the *journée*—as that drastic critic, Fouquier-Tinville, used to name his daily ovenful—and the whole morning was before her in which to try their cases and pronounce sentence. Her method was simplicity itself. She would skip through the opening chapters, two or three, consult the last curiously, and guess all that lay between—the very procedure of her great prototype. The "plot," as with him, was always presumed. For the rest, wit, dignity, reputation did not affect her in the least. She was as profoundly unread in contemporary as in classic literature, and a name, however honoured, might claim no immunity at her hands from a charge of plagiarism or untrue psychology, in case it chanced that she could trace the former to an utterance, say, of Dan Leno's, or had never, in her strictly self-limited experiences, come across a similar instance of the latter. She did not, indeed, profess to be literary or learned. She represented, she would have told you, the plain opinion of the plain majority, and had acquired, by practice, the power to appraise at a glance the

popular qualities recommending a work, or any number of works, to the notice of her own sex. Biscuit-bakers, I believe, employ a functionary whose sole business it is to break and smell eggs. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto stood in this same relation to her employers and the public. Never a bad egg, from the popular consumers' point of view, found itself recommended in the review column of the *Happy Despatch*. That was one extraordinary result of what modern pessimists call "the commercialising of literature." But literature, it seems to me, remains in exactly the same position it has always held. It is no fault of its producers that criticism allows Mrs. Davenport-Pintos to call themselves of its fraternity, and permits their judgments to go by default. If literature desires anything, it is protection from this unqualified rabble. It would like to see criticism proper incorporate itself as a learned society, whose senate should represent the High Court of Appeal from all prejudiced or illiterate judgments.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Davenport-Pinto has taken up at hazard, and reviewed, the first novel of her batch ; and this is the sentence she pronounces on it.

" *The Little Brown Lady*. By Seymour Frederick : London, Cave and Turner : pp. 349—6s. This is a novel difficult to class. If it were not so bad, it would be better. Objects which might be interesting, and certainly clever, are rendered nauseating by touches of taint. Often it is amusing, as well as piquant and alluring, but again we are inclined to think it a weak decoction of Swinburne at his worst, with a dash of Shakespeare and a flavouring of the undesirable qualities of Swift and Smollett. The

author not only calls a spade a spade, but he evidently would give them a more evil name if it had one. Exceedingly sensation readers who endeavour to comprehend the identity of the heroine may not think their labours rewarded at the end of it. The style is of the tiresome sort called precious, but is not nevertheless above a weakness in its grammar. Probably most readers, like the reviewer did, will find it as troublesome to unearth the meaning. The similes seem to over and over again run mad. Who before, for instance, would ever compare an apricot to a ball of hot glass? The book is full of this sort of thing."

Hector Leveson was reading in one of the windows of the room, and to him, as to a brother craftsman, Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, after her swallow-flight through "The Little Brown Lady," put a question—had he seen this novel? Yes, he said; and read it, moreover.

"O!" she responded. "Now do glance through it again, just to refresh your memory while I am writing my notice, and tell me what *you* think of it."

He declined positively. "I never read a book a second time," he said.

"I don't want you to read it through, of course," she protested. "But, why?"

"Why," he answered; "if 'twas once original, it cannot be twice original; and if 'twas counterfeit, 'tis best forgotten. But you can depend upon my memory here for a reasonable synopsis."

She was already at her scribbling, and not attending to him. Presently she paused, with her pencil to her lips.



“ I can’t think who to compare him to,” she said — “ what other writer ? ”

Leveson caught the murmur, and looked up.

“ Why to any ? ” he asked.

She glanced round at him amused.

“ O, my dear man ! They all copy somebody or other. Do you suppose that, with so much ready-made material at hand, they’re going to start being original on their own accounts ? That’s the advantage of having a good show of standard writers, as we critics ought to know. The others are all made in sizes to fit them, and it’s only a question of finding the right model. O, I know ! ”

She dipped to her work again, and in a short while completing it, had absolutely the complacent effrontery to pass the paper over to Leveson.

“ There—does that give *your* idea of the book ? ” she asked, and tapped her teeth calmly with her pencil while he read. He read deliberately, without missing a word ; and at the end looked up. “ He whom Nature ” (he was quoting to himself) “ has made weak, and idleness keeps ignorant, may yet support his vanity by the name of a critic.” There was an assuaging picture in his mind of some Johnson, burly and furious, lashing these hucksters out of the Temple.

“ You have read this book through ? ” he asked.

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto laughed merrily.

“ You absurd creature ! I have just tasted the great cheese of a thing, of course. Isn’t that how you do your marketing ? or do you make a meal off everything that’s offered you ? You might, judging by your size ; but less is enough for me.”

He pursued the matter patiently.

“ In what, may I ask, does Mr. Seymour Frederick feebly resemble Swinburne and Shakespeare and Swift and Smollett ? ”

“ O ! one knows their character. That ought to be enough.”

“ No ; but something specific ? ”

“ He puts things in a way that’s not nice.”

“ Throughout ? ”

“ I expect so.”

“ Why ? ”

“ O, really Mr. Leveson ! You are very persistent. Well, you can’t go back on a proverb, can you ? and isn’t there one about judging the whole from a single instance ? In the second chapter, if you will have it, the man begins with a sentence which, to my mind, is simply disgusting. There ; you shall judge for yourself.”

He took the book from her, and read : “ ‘ These reflections are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater*, and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion.’ ”

“ A quotation,” he said—“ if I don’t mistake, ’tis from ‘ Love’s Labour’s Lost.’ ”

“ I don’t care what it’s from,” said Mrs. Davenport-Pinto. “ I’m not more squeamish than most ; but there’s a way of putting things, and there’s not a way. However, it’s only what one expected of him.”

He handed the book back.

“ Exactly,” he said ; and laughed and shrugged his shoulders. His tolerance, perhaps, was greater than the occasion demanded. He contented himself with adding : “ In my lesser opinion, the work is a

fine one. I read and enjoyed it. Mr. Frederick's style does him yeoman's service throughout a fine romance. An apricot, with its bloom, is, now I come to think on't, well compared with a ball of red-hot glass. There's a semi-transparent glow about the thing as it smoulders under its leaves."

She was saved from any comment, angry or sarcastic, by the appearance in the room, at the moment, of Mr. Batten. He came tripping in, with some papers in his hand. The sight of him restored her to her good-humour.

"Come along, Bat," she said. "We won't dispute your claim to originality anyhow. Are those the samples?"

The clergyman smiled a tolerant affirmative. He had consented, at the instigation of a little politic flattery on the lady's part, to read her some examples of the moral paraphrase of the Book of Nonsense which he had once amused himself by planning.

"They are only notes, suggestions, very incomplete indices of my intention," he said. "But, such as they are, they may serve to postulate the lines on which I should propose to proceed. Here, for instance, is an example of the ethical uses to which a very preposterous conceit may be turned. As you appear to know the original, no doubt the conversion of the young lady of Smyrna will be obvious to you"—and he read out, in his most sonorous pulpit voice, the following:—

"There was a young Christian of Smyrna, when the infidels  
threatened to burn her,  
Uplifted the BOOK with so glorious a look,  
It converted the Tetrarch of Smyrna."



“There is there,” said Mr. Batten, lowering his voice to the layman’s key, “a complete vindication, if I may venture to say so, of a form of metre extravagant only in its misuse. The form, *per se*, is terse, penetrating, and emphatic. I can conceive it, properly used, an inspiration to the earnest, and a knife to the backslider—as thus” (he referred to his papers again) :—

“A certain old drunkard supposed that all doors to detection he’d closed ;

But the angel looked in on that man in his sin,  
And marked him for hell while he dozed.”

A curious sound came from behind the book which Leveson held before his face. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto had taken out her handkerchief, and was affecting to blow her nose.

“I can quite imagine that sort of thing,” she said presently, “striking thoughtless people all of a heap. You have really a very moving way with you, Bat. Any more ? ”

“Mostly fragmentary, I am afraid,” said the clergyman. “I warned you, you know, that my scheme was inchoate—merely in its experimental stage at present. For example” (he scanned the page)—“there is the ‘old person of Ewell, who chiefly subsisted on gruel’—very temperate and instructive. But then, the ‘mice’ he is said to have inserted to make it more nice ! Why not substitute ‘spice,’ which would serve at once truth and the rhyme without outraging reason ? Again, there is the ‘old person of Rheims, who was troubled with horrible dreams’—obviously the result of some excess or intemperance, whose moral could be readily con-

veyed in the sequel ; or ‘ the old person of Burton, whose answers were rather uncertain ’—what opportunity here for a little lesson on lukewarmness in faith ; or—but I have enlarged upon this a trifle more fully :—

“ There was an old man in a pew, whose coat was of complicate hue,

One half made in Rome, and one half at home—”

“ So what were the bishops to do ? ” came from behind Leveson’s book, in a very muffled voice.

“ Eh ! ” cried Mr. Batten—“ O, yes ! to be sure—very well suggested, Mr. Leveson ; only I am afraid it implies an attitude hardly reassuring or uncompromising enough for the opponents of disestablishment. However, we will let it pass for the present. Here, I find, is a more finished example of my method. I had overlooked it. It embodies, I think you will admit, a complete little moral in a nutshell :—

“ I know a young spinster of Parma, whose conduct grows calmer and calmer.

The reason is plain ; having learnt to abstain,  
She’s to wed with a moral young farmer.”

Mr. Leveson rose, with staring eyes and an apoplectic face, from his seat by the window, and limped rapidly out of the room. Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, after a vain attempt to plug her mouth with her handkerchief, burst into an uncontrollable shriek of laughter. The clergyman, dumb and open-mouthed, stood staring from the lady to the door, and back again.

“ I really fail to comprehend,” he was protesting loftily, when Acton came quickly into the room.

“ Can you tell me,” he began, and stopped in astonishment. “ What’s up here ? ” he asked. “ Has Batten been reading his ‘ Pilgrim ’ to you ? ”

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto gasped herself into sobriety.

“ O, no ! ” she said—“ something—something much funnier.”

“ Well,” said Acton peevishly—“ if you can forget it for a moment. Do you know what’s become of Mrs. Owen Merrivale ? ”

“ I saw her go out,” said Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, still fighting for her breath—“ an hour ago—I dare say—or more—all by herself in the rain. Why ? ”

“ Why not ? ” said Acton rudely ; and he turned and walked out of the room.



## CHAPTER XIX

LADY WOODROFFE had by no means forgotten her promise to Robin to call and be introduced to Ferdinand. She was postponing the visit only until such time as she should have made herself intimate with the contents of the packet of books forwarded to her from London. It comprised the most which stood to the name of the author John Wisdom, and she read through the volumes chronologically. They filled her with a genuine admiration for the writer's strong gifts of imaginativeness and characterisation, though she was perhaps incapable of fully appreciating their more delicate artistic quality. Her naturally quick perceptive enabled her to a rapid absorption of their matter ; her training and habit of mind grasped with enthusiasm at the dramatic intensity of their situations. At the end of a week she could have passed a very fair examination in John Wisdom, and was prepared to be his quite devoted eulogist. All who had stood in the way of his public recognition were her enemies, and hide-bound Philistines at that.

Even Hector Leveson came in for his share of reprobation ; he had to answer for the insensibility of his craft.

“ You critics remind me,” she said, “ of those unmarried people, who could always, if they chose,

don't you know, give the married ones such a lesson in the proper bringing-up of children. I should like to limit you to only those who could each prove having written at least one successful book himself."

"I don't know that that would much improve matters," answered the big man with a laugh. "Accept as true all the hard things said about reviewers as disappointed authors, noblemen's valets, and the like ; is success, then, so superior to feelings of jealousy towards better success ? The lion, I think, will maul the lion, as much as the jackal will maul the jackal."

"But I am talking of the jackal mauling the lion," she answered sweetly. And then she flashed into generous scorn. "To hear that Mr. Currie, with his eternal stuff about the age of the giants ! Of course size may appeal to some people, like that Machnow creature who ate three dozen oranges every day between his meals. But, for myself, I can't see what prolixity has to do with any sort of greatness but bulk. Take one of the best of our modern writers, and give him a free hand to prose through two years of monthly numbers, and I dare bet he'll compare favourably with the prozers of the past. But he's learnt to know better ; and anyhow it's no good sneering about pigmies when the public won't stand any book that it can't read at a sitting. To my mind the modern author has adapted himself wonderfully to the hard conditions of his age. Now, don't you think so ? "

"O, with all my heart ! " cried Leveson ; " though I think prolixity was hardly a main condition of Thackeray's success, say, or Dickens's.

To prevail in spite of it, not because of it, was the wonder. It needed some staying power, some vastness of conception, to conduct those parties of theirs through their interminable destinies, without one false step or inconsistency. I doubt the power of any modern writer to interest unflaggingly quite over that area. But that is not to cheapen his capacities. He has been forced, as you say, to adapt himself to circumstances ; and capitally, in the best instances at least, he has done it. He has learned to concentrate, to shear off superfluities, to compact his complexities in a way that would have been the despair of the older men. If his dialogue be not all pith, he is accused of pointless verbosity ; if he linger over a by-issue, he is told that he is delaying the action. So things are, and so we must accept them. We will dismiss Mr. Currie, with only a lament for his prejudice. For the rest, the critic must judge a writer by the standard of his age, and, for myself, I will admit that ours is an exacting one. Artistically, estimated at its best, it shows, no doubt, on a high level."

She held a book in her hand, and she tapped it imperiously.

"If the critics were all like you, I daresay. But the standard of his age, indeed ! Does not this come up to it ? "

"John Wisdom's ? " he answered. "Well, you know what I think of him."

"And yet he's a failure."

"My dear young lady ! You may take a horse to the water—is the proverb necessary ? We may paint this man all the colours of the rainbow ; but



if the public don't fancy him, the public won't read him."

"Why don't they fancy him?"

"Ah! Why not? 'Tis no good saying that the public is an ass, because the public will as often as not exalt a writer of real merit. The truth is that the very qualities here which are *merum sal* to the person who knows how to read, are the very stumbling-blocks to the person who wants to read without the knowledge—and he is as a thousand to one. The artistic emotion is simply non-existent in most. They want plain stirrings of the feelings—as ungrammatical as you please, so long as the appeal gets home. I don't say that this author's appeals are not intrinsically true and affecting; but no doubt they are often expressed in a language which is above the common understanding. 'Tis all comprised in that. If one covets a large audience, one must speak what a large audience can comprehend without effort. The humanities must come before the unities."

"Well, he makes *me* laugh and cry."

He paid her a pretty compliment to her intelligence on that; but indeed he did not know, nor perhaps did she fully, what lay at the deepest root of her advocacy. She was defending the cause of the man she loved.

This statement is ventured *ex re nata*, so to speak, and is founded on a pretty definite suspicion. Lady Woodroffe had become all in a moment jealous of Mrs. Owen Merrivale, who, like herself, was, for all practical purposes, a widow with a past, with experience, and with means ample enough at last to

justify in her the fullest indulgence in those emotions with which matches of expediency have nothing to do. In these matters, she knew, once bitten is never twice shy with a woman; but unhappy experiments in marriage are, on the contrary, the surest provocation to widowhood to try again.

Now, it is a common assertion of the pious that marriages are made in heaven—a question which is open to dispute. If they are, they do not always, it must be admitted, reflect credit on their manufacturers. Sometimes they carry a suspicion of the sort of brand which once stigmatised goods made in Germany. They seem cheap affairs, and are far too easily broken. The home commodity would appear, on the whole, the preferable one. It begins with passion, where the other, by very good luck, may end with it. It may or may not; yet surely no contract should be a contract and speculative. So stupendous a bond should only be justified through a mutuality of desire. If that does not exist, the result is a marriage of convenience, than which, I think, there is no more abominable outrage on Nature under the sun. Of course, we know, a good many good people believe that Nature only represents the devil in us waiting to be exorcised. Well, all we can say of those people is that they are very welcome to the heaven where their marriages are made.

That all seems by the way; but there is a relevancy in it. Lady Woodroffe had made a *mariage de convenance*, and, so, according to her assumption, had Mrs. Owen Merrivale. Very well; the next inevitable step with either was towards a marriage

of love. She had not considered the necessity of the step until this moment. Now, a consciousness of rivalry in the air, as women somehow feel it, was making her think ; and making her think made her jealous. The idle thought in her had grown in one night into an intensely covetous one ; the case of pleasant inclination was become a case of desperate emergency.

It seems improbable, to be sure, on the face of it, that one so common-sensible, so astute, so far-calculating as Miss May Flowerdew had proved herself to be, could be found capable, under any circumstances, of falling in love at first sight—for that is what it amounts to. Well, I would qualify the insinuation, if I knew how. Very possibly love at first sight is a condition always commensurate with jealousy at first sight. Urgency may precipitate what otherwise would be a gently progressive sentiment. Anyhow Lady Woodroffe was already, on the strength of a very brief intimacy, so favourably disposed, shall we say, towards Herne—the melancholy and mystery and personal charm of the man—that the thought of his possible preference for another was galling to her.

And here, even consciously to herself, was a second riddle. It was not so much Herne, as the child, about whom her imagination chiefly clung. She loved and courted the little fellow in her heart, as if somehow it were he who was to account for the strange new spring of dreams and emotions which had arisen in her, to flood over an ancient drought and sow her unfulfilled life with darling sprigs of green. She longed for the day to come, when, her



task finished, she could go to this little ambassador with her credentials, as it were, in her hand. Alas ! that day, when it dawned, found her full of doubt and embitterment.

Acton was the cause. He had hardly intended to be, until a chance revelation suggested to him some profit to himself in playing on that strained nerve of hers. He had sought her in the first instance, full of the very subject, but not guessing her personal involvement in it. For a week or two now he had made it his business to watch Mrs. Merrivale. He was not the kind of man to let any sort of delicacy of feeling stand in the way of his worldly interests, and he saw no harm, but great possible advantage, in a suitor being his own private inquiry agent. A good deal of secret animus underlay his espionage. He had not forgotten his provisional rejection by the lady, though he did not attach *too* much importance to behaviour which no knowledge of his real intentions had helped to dictate. Very likely, had she guessed the potential suitor in him, it would have been vastly different. The question now was, had the gratifying suspicion dawned upon her since, and was she seeking to bluff him in consequence into a proposal, with Herne for her trump card ? He might be forced, in that case, into affecting, for the sake of the game, a doubt as to his own chances—a simulation which would be most distasteful to him. Neither his disposition, nor the time at his command, favoured such befooling coquetries. On the other hand he could not be expected to regard Herne seriously as a rival. That that broken and discredited scribbler

could ever be so much as in the way to cross his, Acton's, matrimonial projects, was a thought almost incredible in its absurdity. Yet he knew women well enough to know how they often, even the most conventional of them, falsify one's most exact estimates of their characters, and the resentment in him was always on the alert to accept and retaliate on such a preposterous situation, should he actually come to be convinced of its fact. The scandal of secret meetings was still, in the last resort, his weapon of revenge.

One day, finding Lady Woodroffe alone, he seized the occasion to open upon the subject.

"O, by-the-by!" he said—"referring to what you once told me about Mrs. Merrivale—I think we may fairly assume that she is, in actual fact, a free agent."

They were in one of the green-houses, and Lady Woodroffe, with gloved hands, and a pair of scissors in one of them, was engaged in clipping off decaying leaves.

"O!" she said, going quietly about her work—"in what way, do you mean?"

Acton feared interruption, and was in a hurry.

"Simply this," he answered; "that, knowing what she is, so particular about appearances and all that, I don't think she'd commit herself otherwise to so very obvious a courtship of our friend over there in the haunted area."

She dropped her scissors, and, as he picked them up for her, he noticed that her hand was trembling a little. He looked straight in her face then, and "Ho-ho!" thought he, "the wind lies that way,

does it ? ” The revelation was surprising, and full of possibilities. He resolved, on the instant, on a policy of frankness.

“ I’ve the best reason for knowing it,” he said. “ They meet a good deal on the sly ; and, to do her justice, I believe she’s quite incapable of misleading any man, or playing any sort of a double game.”

She had recovered herself by then, and looked him relentlessly in the eyes.

“ You have been spying ? ” she said.

He flushed a little, hesitated—and brazened it out ;

“ All’s fair in love and war.”

“ Love ! ” she exclaimed, and her lip lifted.

“ I may be allowed to know as much about it as you do, Lady Woodroffe,” he retorted.

“ If you like,” she said. “ So you are in *love* with Mrs. Merrivale ? ”

“ I wish to make her my wife.”

“ Ah ! to be sure. Now I understand.”

“ And approve, I should think—if I were successful, that’s to say.”

“ What do you mean by that ? ”

“ O, your impartial interest in a friend’s fortunes, of course.”

“ A friend ? Do you mean you or her ? ”

“ Both of us. I am sure you would like to see us make a match of it.”

“ Are you ? I am very fond of Mrs. Merrivale, you know.”

“ *Were*, you mean, don’t you ? ”

She had resumed her clipping.



“Mr. Acton,” she said quietly, “do you know you are a rather intolerable person.”

“O!” he said—“I’m sorry—my mistake”—and he was going. She stopped him, almost hurriedly.

“You don’t seem to understand the offence of blackening my friend’s character to me.”

He turned, whistling, his hands in his pockets.

“What’s black about her? Didn’t I admit that the fact of her permitting herself this freedom exonerates her from suspicion in my eyes?”

“It isn’t nice in a woman to do the courting on her own account.”

“Bless you, you all do it, though after different methods. Who knows if, according to her own particular, she isn’t only playing off this man against Mr. Perceval Acton? I’m sure you’d like to think that was the case, anyhow.”

He knew by this time that he could dare it, and, as he expected, she passed the insult by. A short silence fell between them, while she snipped off leaves and twigs indiscriminately. A jealous woman may judge generously on impulse, but never on reflection. Every moment of consideration multiplies her grievance, until at last she has lost all sense of its proportion.

“How do you know they meet?” she asked at length, after a vain struggle with herself.

“Because,” he answered, “I have made it my interest to know. She puts herself in his way—they walk and talk together—she has been to visit him in his confounded den under the trees more than once. She wasn’t at lunch to-day. She had

gone out, by herself, for a walk, as I happen to know. I don't mind betting a sovereign we shall find her there if we go and look."

He paused a significant moment, daring her eyes with his.

"*Let's* go and look," he said suddenly, and put out his hand. "Let you and me make a compact of this business."

She allowed him to press her fingers with his own. "Very well," she said. "If you are so particular. Will you please to go and tell Roberts to bring round the motor?"

She lingered an instant behind him to tear off the glove he had touched and threw it under the flower stands.

## CHAPTER XX

WAS Mrs. Merrivale, in truth, setting her cap at Herne? Whether or not she manœuvred to put herself in his way, it was certainly a fact that the two had slipped into a habit of companionable intimacy. In such a woman, so sweetly strait and straitly reserved, this concession to the unconvensions was at least suggestive; and so far Acton was justified in accusing her. It is true that she would have been overcome with shame had she guessed the interpretation put upon her conduct—and then, recovering, would probably, in a perverse defiance, have tacitly enforced her right to act exactly as she thought proper. But she never guessed of any interpretation, or thought for a moment that she was a mark for the world's observation. Her sex, the most censorious of critics on behaviour, is always the most blind to its own provocations of censure. A woman will not infrequently arraign in another woman the very lapses of which she is personally guilty at the moment, and that without the least apparent consciousness of inconsistency. All laws, the truth is, she holds only applicable to herself in the abstract. Individually she is eternally the exempt one. Mrs. Merrivale, the most gently orthodox of her sex, thrilled only in the sweet



unusualness of assignments the propriety of which she might have questioned in another.

Her blindness, to be sure, was, like the childish Nydia's, a very pretty defect. It wove a kind of romance about her feet, which was none the less alluring because there were thorns in it here and there. The secrecy in that—the hiding from the knowledge of the world (as she thought) was its dearest charm. She loved to pet her fancy with the picture of this knight of hers, awakening, at her sole soft instigation, from his lethargy, and holding out his strong arms for her to lace the steel pieces into place on them. How her heart would bound to see him rise again, and brace his loins and set his lance in rest, and charge down at last on his deriding enemies, her sleeve about his helmet. That was all, she told herself—no claim upon him but to acknowledge her disinterested part in his self-vindication—no claim whatever or hope beyond. How could there be? There was a secret in his life, as in hers. The shadow of the child stood between.

She had learned to love this man—let it be out and done with—but, even had he shown a sign of responding, she could not let him love her. So she told herself—that any hint of such a return must necessitate an immediate end to their pleasant meetings. And all the time she drew him on, tempting the end she professed to fear—and so suddenly was awake to the full knowledge of a rival in the field.

She had already once suspected it, but the long delusive calm which had followed Lady Woodroffe's

outburst had convinced her that she had misread her friend. But now, alas ! the suspicion was alive again, and rampant.

It awoke a desperation in her breast which was, in actual truth, so far removed from jealousy that it turned solely upon a deep concern for the other. She wanted somehow to let her know that she could not, by any possibility, expect her fancy to be reciprocated—that she was sure of it, on general grounds, or particular, if she liked. And so, what would be the answer ? That the particular grounds were—what ? Why, just a preference of her own—a sort of dog in the manger attitude. She would not have this love herself ; but she would not allow it to any one else. “ O ! ” she despaired, as she threw herself one afternoon upon her bed, “ if only he were not there ! ”

It was the child she meant—always the child. Were it not for him, how different things might be ! But so long as the mystery of the little creature remained unsolved, so long was her ideal impossible. A laxity in moral courage might account for all in this man—his impressionability—his too easy surrender to circumstance. She wanted to think of him as without fear and without reproach—and she could not, with that between them. The very contradiction between his secret life and his written sentiments would prove him, were itself proved, a soul so unworthy of her faith in it.

And yet, what was proved at all ? Surmise, innuendo, slander ?—he might speak the word which would lay them at a blow. But who had the right to ask that word ? Not she—not she out

of all the world. Even to seem to probe for the truth were to give her secret away. The shame of the thought made her cheek hot against her pillow where she lay.

If only he, the boy, had never come to stand between them! What was not his share, in this weary complexity of things, in misrepresenting to others her true nature! Why, that yearned towards childhood; loved and was loved by it; no baby but by instinct held out its arms to her. It was a cruel spite which could so force her into this libel on herself. She thought of the sweet grave little fellow almost with fierceness for his innocent part in her traducement—hated herself, at the same time, for her rejection of his pretty advances. His elfin charm, his small courtly ways, the indefinable suggestion of pathos which seemed to haunt the mystery of his being—how they would have moved and attracted her to him in any other connection! Now their very graces, suggestive of his origin, were what most repelled her. She wondered what of them he would have shown, had he been her own. She had married as a mere child—was little more than a girl now—but the tragedy of wifehood at least justified in her that poignant thought. What a torturing ecstasy to throne this little figure among the might-have-beens, and love in fancy what she shunned in fact!

If he, that other, might but once suggest, by word or sign, that he had no claim on this little life beyond the one claim of sentiment, how happy he could make her! Her fancy ran over a hundred wild schemes for forcing the truth from him. “Me, not



my darling, no ! ” The words of the beautiful poem were continually in her mind. What exquisite art of love had extracted the exquisite truth there ! Supposing she could face him with some tale of the boy in danger !

The thought made her burn and shiver. Were Fate really to put her in a position to do so, and the result were the revelation she dreaded, what avalanche would she not have called down ! Imagine herself, for ever disillusioned and withdrawn, leaving the field to her friend and rival ! Already, she knew, the contrast in their attitudes towards the boy was sufficiently remarked upon by the boy’s dear comrade. He could not but approve the one in his heart as much as he resented the other, or fail to respond very kindly to his courting, as it were, by deputy. And so, what must be the end ? Only disaster and ruin for all, as she read it. The child’s shadow stood paramount over everything.

It was the events of the last few hours which had provoked this storm in her. As she lay on her bed, she was but just returned from an ordeal which had tried her every nerve of endurance. It had come about in this way.

The morning had been wet, but at noon, the weather clearing a little, she had gone out for a walk, hoping, perhaps, to come somewhere upon Hector Leveson, who, she knew, shared her own indifference to lunch, and was wont to take his constitutional about that hour. At this date the house-party had thinned down to herself and four others, the rest having filtered off North or South

as their engagements claimed them. Of those remaining, Mrs. Davenport-Pinto and Mr. Batten were due to leave on the morrow, Leveson a day or two later, and Acton at his own indefinite convenience. She wished she could think she had no part in influencing that ; but at the worst there was a suggestion in the general movement of a clearing of the board for an action which were the better faced without witnesses. Instinctively that was the term her soul applied to some vague premonitions which were shaking it. She dared not even try to realise them ; only, as animals scent the far-away storm rising under a serene sky, so she felt in herself the thrill of some threatening great darkness.

Coming down by Tal-y-sarn, it suddenly occurred to her that she had some shopping to do in Caer Gollwyn, and that there was a train just about due. It meant no more than a run of ten minutes ; she hurried down to the station, took her ticket, and her seat (the train, by some extraordinary oversight, being punctual), did what she wanted, and went back to the little station at Caer Gollwyn to await a return train. Standing upon the platform was a man, who, from his rather pronounced " foreign " appearance, caught her momentary attention. He was a small foxy-looking individual, with a drab Homburg hat tilted to one side of his head, and blots of eyes floating in inflamed sockets. As she looked, he caught her glance and returned it with interest. A certain quality of insolence in his regard made her immediately turn away to examine the volumes on the little bookstall. Fair and attractive

specimen of English young womanhood as she was, she was plentifully used to such unwelcome scrutinies.

As her eyes roamed among the books and periodicals, she noticed a little brown paper parcel, addressed to Mr. Herne, lying on the ledge. She called the attention of the stall-keeper, to whom she was well known, to its direction :

“Is that for Mr. Herne, David ? I am going back that way, and will take it to him, if you like.”

The downy youth, greatly thrilled in the personal condescension of so distinguished a lady, replied, if she would be so good, and handed over the parcel. “There’s a packet of parrot food for him, too,” said he, “if your leddyship cares ?”

She laughed, and accepted the commission. As she turned with the double load in her hand, she was startled, and a little offended, to find that the stranger had come up so close behind her that she had to move to avoid brushing against him.

When the train (it was no more than half-an-hour late) came in at length, and she had taken her seat in an empty compartment, she was still more disturbed, under a chilling exterior, to observe this man getting in after her. She sat, nevertheless, quite self-composed in seeming, trusting to the frost of her aspect to nip in the bud any contemplated impertinence. To her astonishment it utterly failed to impress, for the train was no sooner out of the station, than the stranger spoke to her.

“’Scuse me, my lady ; but might I make so bold as to ask you a question ?”

Her impulse on the instant was to lean from the window, and to cry out for assistance before



carried beyond the hope of it. The man seemed to guess her intention, for he hastily barred the opening with his arm.

“No reason for fright, my lady—none whatever,” he protested aggrieved. “I’m perfectly sober and respectable. It’s those parcels in your lap there that’s interesting me.”

She sank back, a little pale, against the cushions, and looked at him, answering nothing. She supposed he meant to rob her. He gathered confidence directly.

“That’s right,” he said. “You’ll be reasonable, I know, when you’ve heard me explain. I was standing behind you when you undertook to deliver those to their address. A gentleman owning a parrot, is it—Herne by name? Why there it is in a sentence. He’s the very old friend I came down here to find. I thought I’d lit on his tracks a while ago, when I was struck down all of a sudden by an illness, and lost the clue. These people are so rotten suspicious that burn me if I hadn’t thought it gone for ever until, chancing to be at the station, I chanced to hear your ladyship speak the word.”

Mrs. Merrivale, relieved by now of her pressing apprehensions, desired only a quick end to the interview.

“Please to explain,” she said, in the iciest of tones. “What do you want of me? I don’t understand.”

The man leaned forward confidentially.

“About this acquaintance of yours and mine,” he said—“him that you’re carrying the bird-seed to? Now—just to make sure—it’s a green parrot, isn’t it?”

“ Mr. Herne’s parrot is green.”

“ And talks a lot, eh ? ”

“ I have heard it talk.”

“ And maybe there’s a boy living along with him ? Is that the case ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Ah ! ” He drew himself up, and rubbed his hands together, as if gratified. “ It’s a clear providence,” he said. “ I knew they must be settled somewhere hereabouts. I mustn’t make so free, now, as to ask to foist myself on your ladyship’s company——”

He poised a moment tentatively on the issue—

“ No,” said Mrs. Merrivale.

“ But,” he went on, with a little impertinent snigger, “ if your ladyship won’t resent my following your lead, *at* a respectful distance, the result will be all the same in the end, won’t it ? ”

Assuming that everything was said, Mrs. Merrivale turned her face away and looked out of the window. But there was trouble in her mind, for all her haughty attitude of dismissal. What mystery, or complication of a mystery, was suggested in this contretemps ? This creature an old friend of Herne’s ! Not certainly a creditable acquaintance, or a reassuring, if the past were responsible for him. He was a cheap, self-assured, showy little bounder, with something more than a suspicion of drink about him. She would not believe it for a moment. If her hero were not flawless in her eyes, there was no place in her loyal estimate of him for this sort of associate.

Why had the man talked about a clue, or of

owing to accident the discovery of a fact which entailed no secret, so far as she knew? Something sinister or suspicious about him must surely have influenced the people he asked. The Cymric character, like the Celtic, could be, she knew, particularly baffling to informers.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her, and with such force, that she must needs be driven, against her strong inclination, to address once more this offensive little person.

"Did I understand you to say," she asked coldly, "that you were an old friend of Mr. Herne's?"

The stranger entered into the subject again with obtrusive zest.

"That's so," he said, leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees and his palms chafing one another.

"As Mr. Herne?" said Mrs. Merrivale.

"Why, of course," said he. "What else?"

"You don't happen to know, I suppose," she said, "that he has only called himself so within the last month or two?"

He sat back instantly, completely nonplussed, and coned her during a full minute from under his tilted hat brim. She knew then that he had lied, and the knowledge resolved her.

"I must ask you not to follow me," she said. "If you do, I shall have to speak to the police; and, in any case, it will be no good, as I shall not go the way I intended."

He passed the back of his hand across his mouth—seemed to struggle with himself a moment, and then appealed to her ingratiation.



“Look here, my lady—I don’t know the man from Adam—there, I own up to it fair and square ! It’s the boy I’m after.”

“The boy ! ” A shock went through her, making her brain reel. She could hardly force herself to demand, “What has *he* done ? ”

The man regained a measure of confidence.

“Run away, that’s all, from the one as was his natural guardian. If you know anything about this gentleman, you must know that the other doesn’t belong to him by right of law.”

“I know nothing about it.”

It was with difficulty she could command her voice.

“Ah ! ” said the stranger. “A child and no questions asked, *I* see. That’s cummy fo with the polite, I suppose. Well, you may take my word for it. The boy ran away with a gentleman—the two were seen together—and I’d traced them as far as here when I was struck down. Now”—he became very particular and confidential again—“this may be the two I’m after, or it mayn’t. If it is, I just want to make a note of where they’re settled down, that’s all. I shall do it, and go away. You’ll cause no harm to any one by showing me—least of all to your friend. I daresay he acted what he did in good faith. You won’t surely be for denying the law its rights, or preventing a young truant being restored to his parent ? ”

As he spoke, the train drew up at Tal-y-sarn, and Mrs. Merrivale rose. He opened the door for her, and followed her out. She gave up her ticket, and left the station, looking straight before her.

In the little lane leading up to the village she heard a whispered voice at her shoulder : “ I’ll do no more than keep you in sight, my lady. Don’t you be afraid of my compromising you.”

She made no answer but to increase her pace a little. At the head of the lane she just hesitated for a scarce perceptible moment. The gate of the drive to “ Bryntyddyn ” stood some fifty yards beyond the end of the village. She reached it—her heart seemed to vault in her bosom,—passed it by, and went on by the road.

It was early afternoon. The rain had all cleared away, and a dank luminous stillness had succeeded to the downpour of the morning. There was no distracting note in the quiet atmosphere ; it left her free to self-communion ; she hurried instinctively, as if to plead to herself the excuse of some disorder in her thoughts.

A hopeless effort. They were all too clearly defined in their conscious tendency.

“ He does not belong to him. He has run away—from what or whom ? No right to him by law—by what right, then ? By the right of sentiment ? There were instances enough—poignant instances, where associated with divorce proceedings—of kidnapped children. A vile thought—as unjustified as it was possessing. It was monstrous that, on this casual initiative, she should be lending herself to the tactics of some low conspiracy of whose nature she was utterly ignorant. What had given this man the assurance, after his first repulse by her, to pursue his solicitations ? Could it have been possible that her face had revealed, even to his

vulgar understanding, a hint of her real feelings, her real interest in the question? It was veiled; he could have read nothing from it. Yet he had seemed confident in his own insistence—was following her now perhaps in a secret elation over his perspicuity.”

The thought made her burn with shame. Her pace slackened; she was on the verge of turning back. Instantly the footsteps to her rear loitered, as if they were the echo of her own.

“Did not belong to him? Supposing he really did not—were nothing more than a living instance of the Quixotry which people seemed to associate so much with this Herne’s acts? Such natures had often, in their own interests, to be defended against themselves, to be saved from the consequences of their own most lovable but most foolish deeds. This child might be a responsibility, an embarrassment, of which he would be only too glad to disencumber himself, could the opportunity be made his to accept without reproach.”

A conscious, selfish sophistry; but it was enough to send her on again. After all, she told herself, she had admitted nothing, consented to nothing. She was merely carrying out a commission which she had undertaken; and was it her fault if an impertinent stranger made her thereby his passive agent to an end with which she had no known concern?

Nevertheless the reproach of Judas was in her heart, as she set foot on the little plank which crossed the stream. She knew, as she did so, that the footsteps had slipped into the thickets below.



Robin, coming from the house, met her half-way on the plank.

“Herne is at home,” he said. “He’ll be so glad.”

She had a momentary passionate impulse to throw her arms about the child and kiss his lips. The significance of the act, the instant revulsion of feeling, came with the thought. She pushed by the boy, and entered the house.

That night a telegram went off from *Caer Gollwyn* to an address in *Southampton* :

“*Found. Am writing. Paileret.*”

## CHAPTER XXI

HERNE rose, with a rather odd smile, to receive his fair visitor. He had observed, through the open door, the little contretemps on the bridge, and his heart understood while it resented. What right had she to adopt this attitude towards his young favourite—what reason, he might have said ; but that that were a superfluous question ? If women acted on reason, they would have had the suffrage by this time, and ruled all romance and mystery off the earth.

He saw that her face, behind its veil, was so white for the moment as to give her eyes the pathetic blueness of a sick person's. He saw that her breath came quickly, and that for some reason she was at trouble with herself. It was natural that she should be, he thought ; yet her distress, as was as natural to him, touched the soft chords of his heart. Justice and emotion held her between them there a prisoner convicted but unsentenced. He could not be blind to the motive.

She turned her head, as she stood before him, with a quick and agitated gesture.

“ Tell him to come in,” she said. “ Please to tell him.”

He looked the surprise he felt.

“Robin ? ” he asked. The boy still lingered on the bridge.

“Yes, yes,” she answered hurriedly. “Tell him to come in. It—it is bad to expose oneself to the hot sunshine after rain. They know that well enough in Venice.”

He was amused, as well as moved. This unexpected concern for the boy instantly biassed his judgment of her on the tender side.

“Sunshine ! ” he exclaimed—“Venetian sunshine ! Well, if it strikes you in that light ! ”

He called to the boy to come and bring his bare head out of the glow. He half expected her, when Robin obeyed, to show some further interest in the child, expressive of her change of sentiment towards him. But, to his disappointment and perplexity, having once obtained her wish, she returned to her usual attitude of cold indifference ; and he must console himself with what comfort he could get out of that impulsive confession of the true woman in her.

It *was* a certain comfort, after all—enough, at least, to encourage in him a tender self-assurance of his power to improve upon that opening, and win her, perhaps, to candour and an explanation. In the meantime he was looking kindly into her face, wondering over the agitation which still, though in lesser degree, was apparent there.

“You have made your home in Venice, I understand,” he said. “I have never been nearer it than Padua myself.”

She murmured : “So near, and not to be tempted ? ”



"I was afraid of sunstroke—sunstroke after rain," he answered, with a smile. "These cool climates are the best for hot-brained people like myself. We do not lose our heads here over dreaming unattainable things; we can temper our imaginations with the logic of plain circumstance."

"I would not have been so near, nevertheless, and not ventured," she repeated in a low voice. "Venice teaches us things."

"Such as what?" he asked.

"It is the home of dreams fulfilled, I think," she said—and suddenly held out her hands, with the parcels in them. The emotion which was affecting her seemed as though it were getting beyond her control.

"Will you please to take these?" she said. "I found them waiting for you at Caer Gollwyn station, and undertook to deliver them."

As he moved, with a strange look in his face, to take the packages from her, a sound outside arrested him.

"Hark!" he said—"What Jabberwock in our green solitudes! A motor, Robin, a monster! Run out and see who invades us."

She looked right and left of her, as the boy disappeared, as if wildly seeking some hiding-place. On the instant, Herne came and took her hands firmly into his own, imprisoning her from escape.

"Tell me," he said, "in one word—why do you hate him so?"

She struggled weakly. Even in her distress, it was an illogical transport to her—explain it who will—to feel his grasp so strong and determined.

“I don’t,” she whispered—“please let me go, O, please! You must know the reason—or, if you don’t—I can’t help it—I——”

“He came to reconcile me to life when all seemed lost and done with. Will you try to like him?”

“No!”

“For my sake?”

“No—most of all!”

He released her hands, and stepped back, very white, his eyes glittering. At that instant Acton appeared in the doorway. The barrister gave a derisive laugh.

“Hullo!” he said. “Not *de trop*, I hope? This is a surprise visit with a vengeance.”

Herne came forward to greet him. Something, the look in his eyes, reminded Acton of a past uncomfortable experience. He backed—almost upon Lady Woodroffe, who entered at the moment, her arm, fond and fragrant, leaned over the boy’s shoulders. Acton, thus reinforced, recovered his assurance.

“Behold the truant,” said he, “where I prophesied we should find her!”

Herne took the unoccupied left hand which Lady Woodroffe extended to him.

“Mrs. Merrivale,” said he, “happening to be in Caer Gollwyn, and finding some parcels addressed to me at the station, very kindly undertook to deliver them. Your visit is as unexpected as hers, and as charmingly overwhelming to a couple of unsophisticated hermits.”

Lady Woodroffe’s eyes glowed with velvet fire. She ruffled the boy’s head with a caressing hand.

“I had staked my heart on finding *this* little hermit at home,” she said: “and I’m sure *I* shall be the one overwhelmed to hear that any one has stolen a march on me in his affections. Is that the case, Robin?”

She bent, and smiled into the boy’s eyes. Robin blushed a little, and smiled back, and shook his head.

“That’s dear of you,” she said. “But please tell me with your own lips that no one is before me.”

“I will answer for him,” said Herne. “No one is before you.”

He spoke quietly, and turned as he spoke.

“Must you be going?” he said.

His question was addressed to Mrs. Merrivale, who had made a sudden movement as if to leave.

“I’m afraid I must,” she answered—“I—don’t any one stir, please.”

Lady Woodroffe lifted her face. She saw, perfectly well, that the other was on the rack, and quivering to escape.

“By yourself, Margaret?” she said, drawling a little. “Are you going to walk?”

“O, yes! I shall like it.”

“But, do you know the distance?”

“Yes—I think so—I don’t mind.”

“And you aren’t afraid of bad characters about? We passed a very shady-looking specimen along the road down there.”

“I’m not afraid—not in the least. Please don’t raise any more objections. Good-bye, Mr. Herne.”

“Well,” said Lady Woodroffe, “the motor’s down there, and if you don’t care to wait for us, I daresay we shall catch you up.”



“Yes, yes. Never mind about me.”

“I’m sure nothing will give *me* greater pleasure,” began Acton, stepping forward—at which, quite suddenly, Herne interposed.

“Mrs. Merrivale is my guest,” he said, with a perfect good-humour, “and I vow she shall come and go as she pleases.”

There was something of a fiat in that, which his looks confirmed. Acton, just feeling the force of his shoulder as it brushed past him, stepped sulkily aside.

Herne saw his guest across the frail plank. At the further end she turned before she moved away, and gave him a single look of gratitude, so wild and pathetic, that it haunted his mind throughout the night that followed.

When he returned to the room, he found that Lady Woodroffe and Ferdinand were being made known to one another by Robin. The parrot took the introduction in much better part than he had that to Mrs. Owen Merrivale. There was something sympathetic in *this* atmosphere; it aroused no antagonisms. He was pleased to find that the visitor was not made nervous by his show of morosity, but had confidence in the old cranky heart of him. He stumped up his master’s arm, and bent his head and ruffled the feathers on his neck, graciously accepting the tender scratchings which were proffered without fear. Lady Woodroffe turned, with a musical laugh, to her host.

“I grudge you this delightful couple, Mr. Herne,” she said, her fingers still gently dividing the green feathers. “Don’t they controvert Shakespeare’s

statement that 'Crabbed age and youth cannot live together?' But, hush!"

She took her hand away, and put a finger to her lips, with an arch glance at the parrot. No one would have guessed from her manner the torment of the heart-burn within.

"O!" said Herne; "you needn't be so particular for Ferdinand. He's vain of his years above everything."

She smiled and moved closer to him.

"He has the prettiest ways," she said aside—"Robin, I mean. I'm completely in love with him."

Herne's heart was sore for his favourite. This emollient could not but be grateful to it. He kindled immediately.

"That's good," he said, as confidentially; "so am I. He doesn't, I am afraid, appeal to all alike; but"—a shadow crossed his face—"these are cramped quarters to entertain in," he interrupted himself, with a bright forced smile. "The open air is the eremite's proper audience chamber. Would you care to come out and take a stroll round our estates?"

"By all means," she responded readily; and turned to Acton, who all this time was seated moodily apart, devouring his neglect in dudgeon. "I am going for a little walk with Mr. Herne," she said. "We sha'n't be many minutes."

The two went out together, and took the slope loiteringly.

"It must be a very grudging nature, I am afraid," said Lady Woodroffe softly, "that can resist the charm of the little creature."

Herne shrugged his shoulders.

“Who can account for antipathies? This woman and the other are so differently constituted.”

She marked the involuntary implication, with a little leap of the blood.

“Antipathy!” she exclaimed. “It sounds incredible towards such a darling.”

“Ah!” said Herne. “And you only know one aspect of him. There are wonderful things beside.”

“Are there? But I can quite understand it.”

“He is the strangest, most original of all little souls in the world,” cried Robin’s friend enthusiastically—“the most lovable, the most loving; and a genius to boot.”

“Really?” she exclaimed, delighted. “In what way?”

“You have never heard him evolve, invent, narrate one of his stories?”

“Never. How could I?”

“I wonder if he will ‘oblige,’ as the servants say?”

“Do get him to. After all, it is what one might expect of him.”

He was walking with his eyes on the ground, and did not answer for a moment.

“Why should one?” he asked suddenly.

She just glanced at him—a little questioning, inquisitive glance, while her heart thumped.

“I don’t know,” she said; “I thought it just possible he might derive, that’s all. If he did, no blame to him, or to any one, in my opinion.” She spoke hurriedly, and faltered, seeking to turn the drift of her words into an appropriate channel.



The effort flushed her face, and gave it the only charm it generally lacked. "Those who live near the rose," she began; and laughed and stopped. "But I was forgetting," she said, "that *you* were not a story-teller, or the author of anything or anybody."

Her boldness was so frank and irresistible, that it must needs carry its own forgiveness. The hint of sympathetic naughtiness in her, however falsely implied, touched like a pleasurable confidence.

"Forget it, if you like, then," said Herne, himself moved to a freer mood. "It makes no difference, in any way whatever, to Robin's unindebtedness to John Wisdom."

She smiled, and sighed softly.

"Then, I am sure," said she, "that poor little Robin is the only unfortunate one of us all."

She quoted a certain passage on a tender theme.

"It is like music," she said—"altogether apart from the sentiment. I wonder if it gave him as much pleasure to write as it did me to read?"

"I will answer for it," said Herne, "that it gave him exquisite pleasure."

"Ah!" she replied. "That is what must be so heart-breaking. Always to speak the music of words to insensible ears; to be given credit, perhaps, for a dozen qualities which one holds comparatively cheap, and to be ignored, or even insulted, for the art which, to one's finer sense, seems the only real justification of one's literary existence."

He would have been more than human not to feel some gratification.

“I am happier in my friends,” he said, rather low, “than I had supposed.”

She gave him a lovely little smile ; even put her hand, for a thrilling instant, on his arm.

“Please to count me one of them,” she said softly ; “and, perhaps, something more. I wonder if authors—those who move us—ever guess at the secret sympathies they awaken in the hearts of their readers—at the dreams and emotions they are responsible for ? ” She hung her head, and toyed nervously with a flower in her bosom. “I—I have lived with you,” she said, “a number of years now, you know.”

He did not answer, and they strolled on for a spell in silence. Suddenly he looked up, with the frankest of laughs.

“It is a wonderful thought,” he said. “I have been entertaining an angel unawares. Supposing I had known, what inspiration might I not have gathered ! It is a case of *si jeunesse savait*, is it not ? Now I am old and ruled out. We must consider Robin the heir to our literary wedlock ? You shall come and hear what has descended to him from that unconscious union of sympathies. Will you ? ”

They turned and walked back to the house. She hardly knew what to make of his words, though their acceptance of this understanding between them, with the child, as it were, for a pledge of it, stirred her emotions strangely. But enough had been said for the present. She looked about her as they descended the slope.

“The queer haunted old place,” she murmured.

"I am glad we stopped short of the house; it terrifies me, though I only found courage to look at it once. What could have induced you to settle in such a neighbourhood?"

"What induces other people to avoid it, I think," said her companion. "I am too familiar with ghosts to fear them."

Even there her sympathies responded, and she forbore to ask his meaning, though her brain, to be sure, was active enough considering it.

They found the boy alone. Acton, preferring the company of the chauffeur to his, had gone down to await her ladyship's convenience in the motor. Lady Woodroffe came and put an arm very endearingly about the child's neck.

"Robin," she whispered coaxingly, "will you tell me a story?"

But, for some unaccountable reason, the boy hung back.

"Please," he said—"if you don't mind—I don't think I can to-day."

Herne was disappointed.

"And I had pledged myself for you, sonny!" he expostulated.

But the child was obviously distressed. He knitted his fingers, looking pleadingly at his comrade.

"Please, Herne," he said—"not to this one. I feel as if I can't while I'm so sorry for the other—not till she's heard the end of the last I was telling."

Lady Woodroffe released him, and gave his shoulder a kind little pat.



"There, another time," she said. "He sha'n't be forced. You shall tell me a story another time, won't you, Robin?"

"Yes," said the boy.

She dropped a light kiss upon his cheek, and turned to go. Herne saw her down the hill. None might have guessed, but from the brightness of her eyes, what fire burned within. In the motor, on the way home, Acton opened upon her with a sneering laugh:

"You were spared something, being behind me. He had got her hands in his when I came upon them."

She started slightly, just glanced at him, and sank back into the cushions. Why had fate imposed upon her this insufferable confederate! She longed to be able to hint to him, unequivocally, that the proper term to his visit had arrived; she was quite capable, indeed, of that freedom under different circumstances; but the present made the creature necessary to her, and she had no choice but to endure him. She had a cold struggle with herself before she could answer.

"That looks a little damaging to *your* prospects, I am afraid."

He laughed insolently.

"We're in the same boat for that; only *I'm* not the one in love, you see."

"No, I see that very clearly."

"Don't be sarcastic, Lady Woodroffe. *Your* case would hardly be improved, I think, if I acted out of sentiment instead of reason. As it is, I don't despair yet."

“ O ! don’t you ? ”

“ No. I’ve studied the lady. The proprieties still remain to us to exploit.”

“ I don’t understand what you mean by ‘ exploit.’ I shall certainly have to insist on their being respected.”

“ I don’t quite follow you, I’m afraid.”

“ Don’t you ? It doesn’t occur to you, I suppose, that this sort of thing can hardly be very agreeable to the mistress of ‘ Bryntyddyn.’ ”

“ O ! I think it does.”

“ To have myself associated with such doings in the neighbourhood—be held responsible for the local liaisons of my guests ! It is quite intolerable.”

Acton chuckled with immense inward laughter. What godliness, he thought, will not jealousy discover in the unrighteous ! But he approved the sentiment with great gravity.

“ It really is,” he said. “ Who knows what scandal may be already afoot among the natives down there, and founded possibly on something more definite than we suspect ? ”

She bit her lip. Had he been flung that moment from the car and mangled before her eyes, she could have looked on unmoved.

“ What a noble estimate of the woman you wish to make your wife ! ” she said.

“ O ! ” he answered airily, “ I have never been the one to foster delusions of that sort. People of the world, like you and me, recognise the sense of compromising with unmentionable pasts for the sake of advantageous presents, do we not ? No questions asked is the conventional happy bond.

I'd guarantee, anyhow, in my case, not to make widowhood a necessary condition of the lady's comfort. If she would do no more than follow the example of the mistress of 'Bryntyddyn' in remembering what was due to her as a reputable married woman, I should feel quite content, and should make a beautiful husband."

Her hand itched to fling him a backward blow across his mouth.

"I do not think," she said, "I could wish my worst enemy to be your wife."

He laughed, rather flattered than otherwise. A negative respect was often implied in these professed abhorrences. They testified to the recognition of some fearful power in a man.

"You are a little inconsistent," he said; "but circumstance shall be held your excuse. It remains to be seen who *is* your worst enemy, and, if she is exposed as such, what fate you may think too bad for her. I propose putting it to the test, with your compliance. The proprieties remain to exploit, as I remarked. If she stands for them, well and good for you. It will be an interesting experiment."

She would question him no further, and they fell silent. Her heart was burning with shame in the necessity of this vulgar confidence, and with resentment against the guiles of the friend who had forced it on her. She could have stabbed that friend with the soft lightnings of her eyes, as they sat at dinner that evening. The signs of late weeping which she could distinguish well enough on the beautiful face served only to edge her bitterness. It was but one of many womanly appeals in which



she felt herself bettered by this pink and white susceptibility. The slightly flushed eyelids were in themselves a provocation to masculine emotionalism. What pitiful lures, she thought scornfully, were sufficient for men's feet ! What mattered a lack of intelligence, if a complexion of roses hid the void ? Wit, vivacity, understanding were valued all at nothing, unless in the context of white shoulders and a shapely bust. O, if beauty, unadorned and inane, could only be subordinated to its proper place in the intelligent scheme of things ! But men would always credit it with the qualities which were solely the fruit of their own amorous imaginations. The animal was the rampant force. She had never yet known a sensuously beautiful woman to be other than stupid. Yet even Hector Leveson petted Mrs. Merrivale as an intelligence.

She did her rival no more than justice in one way, and a good deal less than it in another. Mrs. Merrivale, in spite of her face and figure, had no mean mother-wit of her own. That seems the word to apply. She nursed it and kept it mostly at home ; but it was generally on view to sympathetic friends, amongst whom Lady Woodroffe hardly counted just now. She looked her best in the evening. One always felt it like a thrilling distinction to be one in her company then—admitted to the seductive mysteries, as it were, of that soft confession of things hidden by day. One understood why her head was poised so sweetly ; what flowery relation her cheeks and lips bore to the ivory texture of her neck ; what crowning perfection to the white mould of her was revealed in the

heavy soft radiance of her hair and the blue shadows of her eyes beneath. If to love her were not "a liberal education," it was because she seemed to embody in herself that spirit of artless wonder which ravishes above all learning.

Presently, during a pause in the conversation, Acton looked across at Lady Woodroffe. Something, some *malversation* in his eyes, made that lady's breath come quick on the instant.

"By-the-by," he said (the visit of the afternoon had already been referred to)—"didn't it strike you how wonderfully that boy of Herne's is like him about the eyes?"

Her heart seemed to stumble and recover itself. Her face, which had gone white, flushed to a hot red. Acton saw, what in fact he had never doubted, that she was going to take up the challenge. She laughed a little laugh of shocked merriment.

"He is certainly a very pretty boy," she said—"the sort of lovely elfish thing one is accustomed to expect from little mishaps of Nature."

He responded with a snigger.

"Zephyr and Flora and that kind of thing, eh?" said he. "But you're begging my question."

"What question?" she asked innocently.

"Why, about his curious likeness to his adoptive father?"

She put up arch hands of scandal.

"You're making out our friend to be a very dangerous character. If you're right, it behoves every woman to be careful in her dealings with him. But I'm sure it's only your fancy, and I won't listen to you."

“All right,” he said coolly, as he took an olive ; “but I knew him before you did, you know.”

“Come, Margaret,” said Lady Woodroffe, rising. “We have sat too long and are verging on the men’s prerogative, I see.”

Leveson opened the door for them. He saw that something was wrong with Mrs. Merrivale as she passed by him, and he gave a little sympathetic pat to her arm. Lady Woodroffe witnessed the act, and it aggravated the shame and bitterness in her. She was glad he was going in a few days—she bristled in fierce expectation of the combat now to come, as she believed.

But Mrs. Merrivale, without a word, walked straight up the stairs to her bedroom.

And what about the unconscious subject of all this amiable intrigue ? Was he by now fatefully resigned to this ruin of his cherished schemes of retirement from the vile arena of worldly things ? He himself hardly knew, perhaps. There was only a wistful wonder in his heart over the inability of such as he to escape from the eternal spirit of romance, which existed, indeed, within themselves.

“Robin,” he said suddenly to his little comrade that night—“why were you so sorry ‘for the other’ ? ”

The boy hung his head, and fumbled with his fingers.

“I don’t know, Herne,” he answered low ; “but—but I was. I—I think she wants to be kind to me, only——”

“Only what ? ”



Robin looked up helplessly.

“I can’t explain,” he said. “She would like to be a mother to me, I think, but somehow—somehow I’m in the way, you see.”

Herne smiled, and said no more.

## CHAPTER XXII

ACTON found an opportunity that evening to whisper an inquiry of Lady Woodroffe.

“Not here ? ”

“She went straight upstairs,” was the low answer.

He grinned.

“Is it war ? ”

She shrugged her shoulders—“If she dares”—and turned to ask Mrs. Davenport-Pinto for a little music, which that lady proceeded to supply literally and voluminously.

“If she dares” ! The scorn in the words ! What would she dare, this gentle thing of peace, this doe with the arrow quivering in her soft side ? They had her at their mercy to bruise or slay. Like all weak meek souls, she had withdrawn into the solitudes to weep upon her hurt—was crouched, no doubt, quivering through all her panic nerves, in terror of discovery. They feared no retaliation there. The measure of the end now was the measure of their mercy.

So they flattered themselves, in disdainful security. They forgot that an enemy despised is an enemy reinforced. They forgot that even a doe, when stricken, will set her teeth in the hand which incautiously offers the knife to her throat.

Harassed without and tortured within, wounded in her faith and degraded in her own eyes through the casuistry of which she had discovered herself capable under temptation, Mrs. Merrivale was far from being in that state of moral collapse which they pictured. Her brow was knitted, her blue eyes frowned, as she walked to and fro, softly, restlessly, endlessly, in her room.

She had been pure, who was corrupt; she had waived her heart's right to discuss this man on other than his own terms. If he had deceived her, she had retaliated with deceit. To do evil that good might come of it! That *she* could have descended to that shameful jesuitry! O, why had she ever left Venice, the city of wistful dreams, to try and reconstruct a dead past out of those phantoms in her brain? Better to have died on that dream than brought it to the cold material test of this woeful land.

Wild indignation mingled with her self-reproach. What malicious fate, coincidence, scheme had brought her destinies to clash with those of this chance acquaintance of a holiday—to be subject to the spites and importunities, moreover, of a vulgar fortune-seeker? So she arraigned in her mind the self-complacent barrister. It had been a ruinous casualty, she mourned. What end to it all? A sense of some impending catastrophe lay heavy on her. She must speak, do something, to clear off a measure of the load. It was intolerable that it should press upon her alone.

Yet, how? She knew that what was death to her was sport to these others—that that relation-



ship, even if acknowledged, would be held no bar whatever to an understanding between the man who could be guilty of it and the woman of the world. And yet, what understanding? There could be none, as she regarded it! But then her code was not theirs. She honoured, and must always honour, her own white trust of womanhood too well to yield it to the soilure of such a contact.

And, straight on that thought, she cried out on her hateful treason, poor soul, and blamed her own readiness to accept the slander. How might not conscious innocence cry scorn upon this love, which was so quick to credit its own abuse on hearsay? O, shame a hundredfold upon them, if they did no more than seek to poison her mind for their own ends! Might not love, of all, be trusted to read the truth or wickedness of such a libel?

She paused in her walk; she raised her head; her eyes shone.

"It is, it is a wicked libel," she whispered to herself. "If it were true, I should have been the first to recognise it."

She was so bright and self-possessed at breakfast the next morning, that her serenity rather discomfited the conspirators. They seemed to scent a hint of danger in the air, and exchanged glances. Mrs. Merrivale, apparently oblivious and at ease, chatted, even unwontedly, with Leveson and the two guests about to depart.

She was at the door when the motor came round to bear Mrs. Davenport-Pinto and Mr. Batten to the station. She gave a rose out of her bosom to the clergyman, who, long conscious of strange

emotions in her company, was quite transported by the condescension. He gasped and straightened himself as if he had swallowed an exhilarating liqueur.

“I shall cher-ish this,” he said, apostrophising the vegetable, with half-closed lids, at ecstatic arms-length, “as the brightest memorial of a visit which has been signalised by not a few gratifying attentions to one who is blest in his double vocation as a priest of the establishment and a catechumen of the temple of Calliope. While I live, I will never part——”

Mrs. Davenport-Pinto, driven beyond patience, pulled him, on the word, smartly and tartly into the car, and he dropped the rose under the hind wheel. In the same instant the chauffeur started the machinery, and the poor flower was squashed flat. As the motor sped away, the ravished hierophant was seen struggling to alight, his submerged head appearing and disappearing round the cushions. Inarticulate sounds issued from his lips; but the lady, like the fairy in the poem, held him fast. As the motor turned a corner, he was observed to sink, with one last stifled yell, and vanish for ever.

Acton, with a laugh, kicked the damaged blossom into the bushes. As he turned from the graceful act, he saw that Mrs. Merrivale, passing close by him, had shot a meaning look his way. He interpreted the glance according to his nature. It was pleading, timid, conciliatory—so he read it. The next moment he had joined her, and she appeared relieved. The ignoble bounder in him chuckled triumphant.

“What a pompous old fool!” he said, as they strolled on together. “I’m glad he’s cleared out at last. If Leveson would only follow his example, we should be quite an harmonious little family party.”

“Yes?” she said. “Do you know, I rather wonder at your admitting the connection.”

“What connection?” he asked.

“Why,” said she, “between family life and harmony. It is such a vulgar commonplace to hold the two irreconcilable, that I am surprised to find you superior to it.”

He glanced at her askance, a little puzzled and perturbed.

“Why me particularly?” he asked drily.

“Why not?” she said. “You take such pains, you know, to impress upon one your utter disbelief in the disinterestedness of any human action. It is your nature to read the worst out of everything.”

It was war, then, and carried into his own territory! He recognised the declaration with a feeling between amazement and exasperation. The confident tyrant in him became all at once the sulky protester.

“That is pretty hard on me, I *don’t* think,” said he. “But I won’t pretend to misunderstand you. The law may be a disillusioning education in general; but it teaches one at least to distinguish the real from the spurious, and to appreciate it, when one finds it at its full value. Very well; I once offered you my counsel, and you declined it. If you desire to include this Herne in the harmony, I’ve nothing more to say.”



She flushed, half turned upon him, and looked away again.

"I am grateful at least for your frankness," she said. "I don't like, I confess, hearing great natures belittled by small, or vicious interpretations put haphazard upon actions, whose only crime is that they don't feel called upon to explain themselves."

He bit his lip, his face rather white.

"Of course I know," he said, "what you are alluding to—our conversation of last night. Well, I wasn't the only one, it seems, to be struck by the likeness. But if you've the best private reasons for knowing the baselessness——"

"Yes, please to stop there," she interrupted him. "I know only that both Mr. Herne and Mr. Leveson, whom you are quite as willing to spite, if you dared, are utterly incapable of descending to the moral level of those who are always more ready to attribute bad motives than good to deeds which are too fine for their common understandings."

He stopped abruptly, and stamped down his foot.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, with a gasp. "This is going a little too far."

"Why, are you not?" she said. "Have you any more grounds for your innuendo here than the merest conjecture?"

He thought he recognised a question, some agitation, in what was uttered in the form of a protest, and he rallied his wits with his anger.

"Really, Mrs. Merrivale," said he, resuming his walk (he noticed that she accepted his initiative), "you are so insulting, that I think I might very well be excused from continuing the subject."

"I think you are bound to answer," she said. "You did not stop there, you know. You insinuated more from your former knowledge of him."

"All right. Believe what you will of the fellow," he said sullenly.

She stopped him peremptorily.

"Your shafts were aimed at me—will you deny it?"

"In sympathy they were—yes, certainly."

"In sympathy with what?"

"Your blindness."

"Open my eyes, then; speak the truth, I can forgive that."

Thus challenged, he hesitated, faltered a moment, and then faced her. An inspiration of daring had suddenly fired his brain.

"Buy my confidence," he said, "and you shall have it. You've another rose in your dress. I put its price at that."

She stepped back, quite amazed, and instinctively placed a hand over her bosom. Not a word came from her lips.

"Come," he said, gathering boldness. "It shall meet with a better fate than the last, I promise you. You must know the reason. If I've been over-critical of this Mr. Herne—which I don't admit—you will allow something to the jealousy of a rival. I must call myself that, I suppose; and you won't think the worse of me for it. I take no exception to your hard words. They were spoken, if not under a misunderstanding, quite reasonably according to the customs of this little game of courtship and matrimony. But now let's

be serious, in Heaven's name. It was good enough sport while it lasted, but don't you think it has been carried far enough? Mrs. Merrivale, if I make a point of the fact that I don't come to you with empty hands or an empty reputation, it's only to justify my right as a suitor before one who——"

She had quite regained her self-composure while he spoke; and she broke in now very quietly, though a bright spot of colour had come to her either cheek.

"One moment, Mr. Acton. You use the words 'rival' and a 'game.' Am I to understand that this calumny is only to be regarded in the light of a 'move' against one whom you choose to consider an adversary?"

He thrilled exultant. He believed that she was growing amenable, after all.

"Yes, and no," he said. "If you will have the whole truth, I believe that the man is a maniac."

"Indeed?" she said. "And therefore, do you mean, a fitting butt for any formless slander which reason chooses to level against him?"

He laughed, though not quite easily.

"O! as to that," he said, "if one lacks the specific charge, one must be allowed to attach some value to report."

"Report!" she exclaimed. Her tone stung him uncomfortably.

"Well," he said, "supposing we consider ourselves superior to it—what is to be thought of a man who, after wasting ten secret uncompanionable years in a demented struggle with windmills, disappears, and turns up shortly afterwards in a



remote place with a fancy child for his sole companion ? The likeness may be there or it mayn't. These romancers, of all people, it might be supposed, would require some outlet for their—ideals, shall we call them ? But supposing it isn't ; supposing that the partnership is just some crank of our friend's disordered brain ? Does that put him any more agreeably in the light of a possible suitor for the hand of one whose happiness is my sole consideration ? Believe me, there is sense in my calumny, as you call it."

"I can quite believe it," she answered ; "and method, too. I will pass over your assumption that my attitude is dictated by anything more than consideration for the fair fame of a friend whom I respect and admire. If I gave it the word I should like, you would not understand me, I think. What your charge amounts to, then, is simply this, that a man who does things which you would not do is a madman in your eyes, and capable of anything."

He was pale with chagrin by this time.

"Do things—that I would not do !" he cried. "Perhaps you were too intent yesterday in assuring him of your *disinterested* consideration to notice the look in his eyes when I turned up unexpectedly ? But I had seen it once before, and I knew."

She was all at once very sympathetic and ingratiatory—putting forward a velvet chin—cooing, almost.

"Knew ? Knew what ? Did he look as if he were going to assault you ? "

"It wouldn't have been for the first time if he

had," cried the barrister—"and that not so long ago either. It's a pretty recent memory with me, his coming to my rooms for advice, the fool—advice to a crack-brained failure whose only logical conclusion was the river and the coroner's court. And I let him know so ; and before the hint was well out of me, he'd caught and lifted me high up against the wall with my back to it, and was looking murder into my face. I thought I was done for, till the fit passed and he let me drop. O, no ! he's not mad—not in the least."

The sweetest pink was flushing Mrs. Merrivale's cheeks.

"*Poor* Mr. Acton !" she murmured dovelike. "That *was* an experience, to be sure"—and all of a sudden she was crying with laughter.

Mrs. Merrivale's sense of humour was a quiet and self-guarded possession as a rule, quaintly aroused, insusceptible to the broader provocations, more easily alarmed than excited. But when it did break bounds, it sometimes made her half hysterical. She laughed now till her eyes were flushed with tears, and her words, in a vain scurry of apology, tripped over one another's heels. The indignation, contempt, resentment which had been overcoming her a moment ago, were all temporarily forgotten in the picture of this cynic and self-important cockscomb wriggling up on the wall, and jerking his little arms and legs about like a furious Japanese tortoise. There was relief, too—a thrill of other things in her outbreak. This Herne—he was physically so strong ; there were the right courage and indignation in his so retaliat-

ing on a wicked and cowardly suggestion ; might she not be underestimating his strength in other directions ? The thought was so grateful to her that her merriment ended on a happy sigh. She looked, half-shamefacedly, though still with twitching lips, at the affronted figure before her.

“Pray forgive me,” she said. “I don’t know what was the matter with me. I think—I am sure, Mr. Acton, that I can quite understand the nature of your spite against your friend.”

The ordinary man would have accepted his virtual dismissal at this point, and saved further appearances by a haughty and dignified withdrawal. But Acton was superior to such conventions. He was not going to forego the shadow of a chance for lack of insistence. He had acquired, through some confidential agency, an approximate estimate of the lady’s income, and it stood at a dazzling figure.

For one furious moment, indeed, his manners had gone by the board in the protest, “Where’s the joke ? I’m damned if I can see it !”—but he had almost instantly recovered himself and regretted the outburst. Now, though pretty pale, an expression something like sickly propitiation had come to his face. He was more plaintive than angry, more hurt than resentful. He represented, as it were, the misunderstood defendant in an action for libel.

“You will persist in misusing the term,” he protested. “It is unfair. To attribute to spite my disinterested attempt to enlighten you as to the real character of a man, who, in my opinion, is



hardly responsible for his actions, and who yet, it seems, is in a fair way to impose upon your good-nature, is hardly just. But let us dismiss him from the question altogether. He can hardly count in it, when everything's allowed or disallowed. Whatever he is, he can scarcely be called an eligible suitor, either in the moral or material sense. I had the honour just now, Mrs. Merri- vale, of proposing myself to you as, possibly, a more desirable substitute. Will you give me an answer ? ”

She became grave, frigid, on the instant.

“ Thank you, Mr. Acton,” she said. “ I am glad you have given me the direct opportunity. No one whatever but yourself counts in this. I thank you, and decline.”

His brow darkened.

“ Is that final, may I ask ? ”

“ Utterly final,” she said. “ I could not and would not marry you under any circumstances.”

He bit his under-lip hard. He glowered at her with fury in his heart.

“ You are a fool,” he said at length. “ It was a chance for you in a thousand to redeem your character.”

She took a single step forward—she had a handkerchief in her hand, a mere filigree lace thing, and she struck him across the face with it. It hurt no more than a cobweb, and he laughed as he stepped back.

“ Tit for tat ! ” said he. “ But you'll find maybe *I* can hit a little harder.”

He turned and left her, strolling away with his head high, and his hands in his pockets.

## CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. MERRIVALE, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks like fire, swept into her friend's boudoir.

“ May, either Mr. Acton leaves this house, or I do ! ”

“ Hush ! ”

Lady Woodroffe came from the window, where she had been standing ; hurried to the door and closed it ; turned and grasped the other by her two arms.

“ Hush ! ” she said. “ I saw—don't make a scene—what had he been saying ? ”

“ You saw ? Had it been arranged between you ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I am speaking quite plainly. Had it been arranged between you, I say ? Was it the intended sequel to the set you two made against me last night ? ”

Lady Woodroffe trembled all through. She was quite cowed for the moment in this revelation of unexpected forces in the nature she had despised for its submissiveness. What dissemblers these meek and milky sanctities could be ! She ought to have understood the character of the passions which made them beings soft to woo and virulent when crossed in their desires. This child-eyed

doe ! Might one not picture her standing mild and provocative, while the brave bucks fought for her possession ?

She was more nonplussed than Acton had been ; she felt very like collapsing ; she could find nothing to answer in that first shock of things.

Mrs. Merrivale forced her arms free and seized the other's hands in hers. She would be the gaoler here, if you please—not the prisoner.

“ Do you hear ? ” she said. “ Why were you looking from the window ? You needn't pretend that it was accidental. Is it not shameful that you should conspire with a cad like that to insult your friend and guest ? ”

Lady Woodroffe's tears began to flow.

“ How can you accuse me of such a detestable thing, Margaret ? ” she complained. “ We made no set against you.”

“ That is untrue. You tried to poison my mind against a friend by insinuating things for which you had no shadow of justification but your own wicked spite.”

Lady Woodroffe, tearfully and resentfully, made an attempt to withdraw her hands.

“ I won't be spoken to like this,” she whimpered feebly. “ You have no right to treat me so in my own house. I have no idea what Mr. Acton can have been saying to offend you ; but, whatever it was, I had no part in it, and there is no arrangement between us. I saw you two go off together, and I did watch you from the window—I confess it ; but it was only——”

“ He proposed to me. Now do you understand ? ”



“ Well, I don’t imagine he meant any offence by that——”

“ And when I refused him, insulted me in such a way that I wished I had had a knife in my hand instead of a handkerchief.”

“ I am sorry to hear that, Margaret—you know I must be. But of course——”

“ He called me a fool for refusing such a chance to redeem my character.”

She tore her hands away all of a sudden, and put them to her face. A little silence ensued. Lady Woodroffe, wiping her eyes, looked covertly at her between the spasms that shook her bosom.

“ The fellow’s a cad—all that you call him,” she said presently, still dabbing fitfully with her handkerchief; “ and—and, I suppose, it’s nature with such creatures to wreak their vengeance for a disappointment in a caddish way. The only pity is that circumstances here should seem to have given him grounds for such a slander.”

Mrs. Merrivale’s hands came down. Her face showed very white, and there was a curious line of pain set between her eyes.

“ Please to explain what you mean, May ? ” she asked quite quietly.

Lady Woodroffe was regaining her self-possession. She had old professional practice in commanding her emotions, and was by far the cleverer and more perspicacious woman of the two. Her voice was steady and calculated as she took up the gage.

“ Why distress yourself in hearing, or me in giving, particulars, Margaret ? ” she said. “ *My*

faith in you doesn't require any explanations ; and, as to his, you neither desire it nor value it. But there's the fact, and, if you won't consider it unkind of me to say so, it would be the most sensible policy on your part to answer such stuff effectively by going away, and leaving it to die a quick death by starvation."

" You mean that, if you were I, you would not stop here any longer ? "

" You know how sorry I should be to lose you."

" —Would run away, and leave your enemies to triumph in the success of their shameless scheme ? "

" You know that is nonsense, Margaret. What scheme, in Mr. Acton's eyes, could possibly include your loss ? "

" He would remain, I suppose ? "

" I am sure he wouldn't. Where would be the attraction ? "

Mrs. Merrivale passed a cold hand over her forehead.

" I can find rooms in the village," she murmured.

" Don't be detestable, Margaret," cried the other.

" I think it would be best," said her friend—and suddenly her eyes were flame again and her voice passion.

" How dare you use such weapons against me—all this veiled calumny and untruth ? What have I done to lay myself open to it ? You shall tell me."

Lady Woodroffe met the charge steadily.

" Very well," she said ; " you will have your way, I suppose, Margaret. Don't blame me, that's all, if it takes you into unpleasant places. I should

have thought, at least, that, as an experienced married woman, you would have known, without my having to tell you, what to expect from popular gossip if you chose to go and pay clandestine visits to a male friend in his lodgings."

Mrs. Merrivale received the stab so quietly as rather to stagger her friend. She only gazed searchingly into the vivacious eyes, which found a difficulty in steadying themselves under that grey inquisition.

"I have been to visit Mr. Herne," she said, "as openly as I am speaking to you now. I have not, in admitting it, a fiftieth part of the shame which should be felt by those who, under the name of friendship and hospitality, can so let me be wronged and slandered for their own unscrupulous ends."

Lady Woodroffe, stung beyond endurance, stepped back as if to get her measure. She was for the fray now without compromise. She uttered a little rippling, derisive laugh.

"O, about that openness, my dear?" she said—"I never knew of these visits until lately, I can assure you, or I should really have felt it my duty to expostulate. With my local position and reputation, you know, it can hardly be very gratifying to me to suppose that my acquiescence in them has been taken for granted. If it is unscrupulous to wish to dissociate oneself from such doings, I am afraid I must plead guilty to the charge."

She shrugged her shoulders, her eyes alight with battle.

"Lady Woodroffe," said Mrs. Merrivale quietly, "you need never hope to marry this man."



The other caught her breath in a quick little gasp, as if she had been countered over the heart.

“If there was any justification but jealousy for the cruel things you say,” went on Mrs. Merrivale, before she could speak, “I should not call your ends unscrupulous, however much you wronged me in seeking them. But you know there is not. You want me out of your way ; and as the insults of your confederate have spoiled your generous purpose so far as that scheme was concerned, you heap outrage upon outrage by urging me, under the guise of friendship and policy, to condemn myself by default, leaving the field to you and to my insulter. When I came in to you, May, I expected another answer than my own dismissal. You have opened my eyes finally to a truth, which, wishing you better than you do me, I had always fought against believing, for your sake.”

She was so very exact, so clear-sighted and so penetrative beyond all expectation, that the rival passions quite winced in this accurate analysis of their motives. Lady Woodroffe, parting with duplicity, accepted battle on the changed issue. The mocking smile died from her lips ; the light went out from her eyes, and left them dark and gloomy.

“For my sake, Margaret ? ” she said. “That is kind of you—the sort of kindness one may expect from a rival. There, I will admit it, if you like. We both love this man, and you, it seems, are loved by him.”

“No, never. I never said so.”

“You said as much.”

“Only that you need never hope to marry him.”

“Why not? Because you are resolved? I can be resolved, too. I can be the favoured one, too, and I believe that I am. Yes, you may start; but there is a way of showing preferences, and feeling them. What right have you to claim him for your own?”

“I have none, God forgive me.”

“Why, see there! Your tactics are no more worthy than mine, after all. You are like the dog in the manger. You only want to keep others from the happiness you are denied yourself.”

“It is not that, May, it is not that indeed.”

For the first time her emotion seemed to be getting the better of her. The other saw it, and pursued her advantage mercilessly.

“It isn’t and it isn’t? What is it, then? O, I think I understand you, Margaret; but I am not to be warned off preserves to which you have not yet proved your title.”

“O, I cannot! I would, indeed, if I might—I would, indeed, May.”

“Of course you would. Who doubts it for a moment. Only, barring the right, you mustn’t complain of trespassers. In the meantime, we will each conduct ourselves according to our fancy. If I believe my position the stronger, you have got to prove me wrong. I, at least, care nothing whatever about this man’s past. He may have committed all the sins in the Decalogue. I am indifferent, so long as he adds to them the last sin of falling in love with me. Do you understand? The more reason there may be for the child’s like-

ness to him, the more reason I shall find for liking the child. One can't have too much of that sort of good thing, in my base opinion."

She broke into a laugh, shrill and uncontrollable.

"O, my dear!" she exclaimed—"don't look so woeful. I declare I am glad it has come to this, and left us naked and unashamed. The air is cleared—it shall be a sisterly contest—and Acton shall go. And do you realise, when all's said and done, that we are quarrelling about a man who may have a wife in the background all the time?"

She stopped—the mockery died out of her voice and her eyes—she took a quick step forward, as if half menacing;

"Why do you look at me like that?" she cried low: "what are you meaning to imply—that he has?"

Mrs. Merrivale turned her face, with the little movement of a hunted thing seeking to escape. The other forestalled her, barring her way.

"You shall answer. Has he a wife already?"

Driven at bay, Mrs. Merrivale stood desperate.

"Has he?" cried Lady Woodroffe again, and she seized her wrist.

"Let me go," cried the poor prisoner. "What right have I to answer for him? He is no more for me than for you. Will not that content you?"

Still holding to her, Lady Woodroffe stared pitilessly into the weeping eyes.

"I can't read you," she whispered presently. "Have there been confidences between you? No more for you than for me, you say? Why, do you suppose our standards are the same, you poor cold



creature of decorums ? Judge for yourself as you will. I am ruled on broader lines. The man of *my* love should not go wanting a pretext, if he desired it, for claiming his freedom from hateful bonds." She flung away the weak struggling hand. "There," she said—"you had better go and make your peace with Acton. He will value respectability for all it's worth. It will have a poor chance in this sort of contest."

She dropped, breathed and panting, upon a sofa. The other, with bowed head and weeping eyes, hurried out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXIV

WHITHER ? This was no place for her any longer ; and, yet, what other ? She had succeeded in nothing but in isolating herself in the midst of enemies—coarse unscrupulous minds with whose intrigues a vulgar fortune had embarrassed the most poignant emotions of her womanhood. And the worst of it was that, while she had come to realise and to hate their contact, a bitter destiny had brought that necessary to the development of the most painfully sweet romance of her own life's story. She could not go, and decree, because of the machinations of this chance irresponsible cabal, the end of that story to ruin. What a tragic fatality it all had been ! And yet, was it quite a fatality ? There had been some little engineering of circumstance, she was sure ; but how authorised or why ? Its justification, for all the result, was still to show.

Still to show ! still to show ! O ! would it ever—could it be made to, in this wretched perplexity of things ? To stay on—swallow her shame and humiliation, and perhaps be disillusioned in the end ? That were worse than death. Better a thousand times to take her wounded spirit and broken dreams back to Venice, and, leaving the

test undared, forget that she had ever come so near its venture.

And so, leave *him* to his undoing! Her rival's threat burnt in her heart like venom. No, she must save him from himself, if, indeed, he needed to be saved, though it meant her drinking the cup of mortification to the dregs.

Once or twice, in the wildness of her dilemma, she thought of Hector Leveson, his large understanding and sympathies, and was half moved, like a child, to go and confide it all to him and find rest in his decision. But, as often, she shrunk from so extreme a step. What right had she to involve him in a quarrel between two women, of whom one was his hostess and an older acquaintance—what right, still less, to traffic in a secret unauthorised by him who was most, and most unconsciously in seeming, concerned in its preservation? She had made a promise, accepted an understanding, and if she was to be disloyal to either, it must ensue on other initiative than her own.

But she felt desperately lost and alone—a bruised, abused, and conscious-stricken thing. She spent the day in her room, overcome with headache and heartache — wearily revolving in her mind the single problem how not to go and not to remain. I think she knew all the time whither her thoughts were tending, irresistibly, though disputing every step of their way—she knew, and struggled helplessly, crying to the gods for mercy and a little respite. Once, towards evening, she recognised Leveson's step on the landing; and she sat up, and hurriedly ordered her hair, and ran out



to speak to him. He saw her flushed eyes, and all the tokens of distress there plain enough ; and the mighty benevolence of the man came about her like a cloak, so that for the moment she felt comfortable and secure. Had he guessed anything of this little feminine drama which was enacting behind his back ? Likely enough, for a good critic has eyes everywhere.

She smiled up into his face, pleading and a little tremulous, and took one of his hands into both her own.

“ It seems so rude of me,” she said, “ to have shut myself away from you on this your last day here ; but—but, *must* you go to-morrow ? ”

He looked kindly into her eyes, and recognised some trouble beyond the physical.

“ Why, haven’t you had enough of me ? ” said he.

“ Stop, and ask me again by-and-by,” she answered, blinking a little.

He patted her shoulder.

“ Are you in need of a friend ? ”

“ O, yes, yes ! ” she said, bowing her head.

He did not reply for a while.

“ A cosy, unquestioning, staunch old Jack-at-a-pinch ? ” said he ; and laughed a little. “ Well, for another day or so, perhaps, if I’m not in the way.”

That comforted her amazingly, and strengthened her for the battle of the night. The inevitable ending to that would not find her without some solace of friendship to fall back upon in case of need.

It was fought out on her pillow ; and with the

grey morning she rose to answer for the well-foreseen defeat. *She must go to this man, as she had known she would have to do all along, and ask him to put her right before the world.*

It was a dull oppressive day—not wet, but heavy with menace. The clouds sat low upon Moel Eidion, ragged and scowling like an old giant's brow. The trees on the hillsides gloomed dark and stark, a “listening fear in their regard.” All things seemed attuned to her mood between fear and fatality. She shuddered as she looked out of her window.

She had not felt called upon to account to her hostess for her yesterday's self-enforced retreat, nor was she now moved to explain on any grounds her absence from the breakfast-table. The least excuse or apology on her part would have seemed to her like a countenancing of the insult of Acton's continued presence in the house. She marked time only in her throbbing brain until the moment should come for her to vindicate her fair fame before the world. That done, there was no consideration on earth could keep her here a day longer.

She packed hurriedly, feverishly, dismissing the maid who waited on her. About nine o'clock, her preparations finished, she stole downstairs and, going out unobserved by the hall door, sped along the drive and entered into the woods by the little wicket-gate before mentioned. She had resolved upon this way as being remoter and the more secluded from observation. The superstition in her was quite forgotten in the stress of deadlier

emotions. She hastened on, with only one thought, one goal to her resolve.

As she crossed the little grassy valley beyond the trees, and mounted the farther slope, the ghosts of a thousand shapeless apprehensions seemed trooping down to meet her. She could not see the hill-top; every bush was become a crouching menace; the brooding thickets, when at length they loomed into her view, seemed like the gathered nucleus of a thunder-cloud. Her cheek was white and her heart jumping as she stood before the ruined iron gate, and, pausing no more than a moment to fight for breath, swung it open and passed through.

If, now, she faltered a little in her purpose, it was for no other reason than that the atmosphere of this place seemed to claim her to its own of watchfulness and terror. All down the long alley it was as if eyes were secretly observing her, soft hands protruded to catch at her skirts, stealthy pressures from within heaving out the foliage. Still, with a sob and a prayer at her heart she hurried on, courageous to that desperate end of honour. No spectre but death should stop her in that course—she reached the house, and went by it with averted eyes.

And then in a moment she stopped, with a little strangled cry. Something was coming down upon her through the mist—something, from the right of the building where the ruined stables stood—a cursing, staggering knot of men, or demons. She could not move or utter further sound—they drove down upon her—and it was Herne, with a madly fighting creature in his grasp.



The man's eyes were like a devil's—his powerful arms gripped his captive's with a wrenching fury—he tore him on, and threw him at the woman's feet, and put a foot upon him as if he were some obscene worm. He could hardly find a voice in the stress and hurry of his passion :

“This—he has done it—my boy—you, do you understand?—what are you here for?—you never loved him—and he is dead—driven to it by this dog!”

His foot trod down. The writhing creature screamed. Mrs. Merrivale stood ashy pale, without word or movement. A horror as of death was in her heart; the face of her deed lay revealed beneath her—a foxy, drunken face, blotched and wrung now with terror, unseemly, distorted—the face of the stranger who had followed her into the railway carriage at *Caer Gollwyn*.

Suddenly, twisting on the ground, the man saw her and screeched out, pointing up a convulsive finger :

“Damn you, let me go! She's to blame if anybody. It was she showed me where you were hid.”

## CHAPTER XXV

MR. PAILERET, palpitating through the woods above Maes-y-Myrddyn, had found it incumbent on him, for the solace of nerves agitated beyond control, to have perpetual recourse to the contents of a substantial oval-shaped flask, which he was in the habit of carrying about with him against those emergencies with which a persecuting destiny was wont to face him twenty times a day. It is true that, in the case of those addicted to strong waters, these tonic-demanding crises would seem to recur with such regularity as to suggest the thought that each successive dram must, in laying its own particular bugbear, beget the form of the next to follow ; but it is just as true that there are more diseases in the world than there are effectual remedies to combat them. An extravagant apprehensiveness was Mr. Paileret's disease, and, being constitutionally deficient in courage, he had fallen upon this imperfect method for supplying the want. By habit and temperament, indeed, he was singularly well qualified for the office he held of tool and parasite to a tyrant.

Despatched by that tyrant on a private mission to discover, and report upon, a certain fugitive from authority, a sense of remoteness from, and independence of, his taskmaster had so tempted

Mr. Paileret into a reckless indulgence in his weakness as to lead to his temporary prostration, in a tavern in Caer Gollwyn, at the very moment when success had appeared to be about to crown his efforts. Restored, presently, to his normal capacities, and to recollection of, and vain regrets for, an opportunity so wantonly forgone, he was puzzling his sore brain over the best method of remedying his default, when chance returned to his hands the very clue he had dropped erstwhile with such senseless bravado. His telegram to Southampton was the result.

A reply to that came while he was still in the act of writing off particulars of his find to his employer. "*Secure truant pending instructions. Headstone*"—so ran the message. Mr. Paileret, breathing a curse, crumpled up his half-finished letter, and went out to fortify himself against the task thus peremptorily imposed upon him.

He did not fancy that task by any means. He even dropped a few tears while cogitating it, and while as yet the fuel in him was smouldering only wetly. He thought it cruel and despotic to depute such a one as himself, so nerveless and sensitive, to a duty that required much strength and decision in a hostile country. But, as the fire in him burned up, drying these springs of emotion, his mood changed wonderfully. It became confident, elate, even malignant. To secure this boy! Why, he would wager he had only to show himself unexpectedly to achieve his purpose. Did not the child of old stand in mortal terror of him? His mere face at the door would be sufficient to fascinate



and demoralise the young wretch. He had only to put it in and beckon, and the creature would follow him like a lamb to the slaughter. What else? There was the man to reckon with? Pooh! Had he, Paileret, not the law on his side?

He took an afternoon train to Tal-y-Sarn, and, his flask recharged at the '*Ship Aground*,' started along the remembered road. It was a warm close day; but he was so well primed that the heat within him defied the debilitating heat without. Reaching Maenol-y-Neuadd, he went on tiptoe up the slope, and, his heart palpitating heavily, crossed the plank over the stream, and knocked nervously on the closed door. No answer followed. He rapped again and again, his agitation increasing, but without result. A thought struck him, goading him to fever. Supposing they had seen him coming, and escaped by the back? He was on the point of wrenching at the handle, when a figure sauntering up the slope arrested his attention. It was that of a young native, stalwart, black-haired, sallow-faced.

"Hullo!" said Paileret.

"Hullo!" said the man.

"Do you know them that live here?"

"Ië."

"Where are they?"

The man spat on the ground, cleared his lips with the back of his hand—and said nothing.

"What's become of them?" said Paileret irritably. "Don't you understand?"

The native was considering him, impassively and without favour.

“ Ië,” he said.

“ Hee-haw ! ” returned Paileret, and added “ You jackass ” under his breath. “ Look here,” he went on, “ are these people out ? ”

“ Ië.”

“ Where ? ”

No answer.

“ They’ll be back before evening, I suppose ? ”

“ Ië.”

“ O, go to the devil ! ” said Paileret, and turned and tried the door, but it was locked ; seeing which, the man spat again, and, with his hands in his pockets, sauntered back the way he had come. Paileret shouted after him in desperation ; he took no notice whatever. The Welsh are not demonstrative in their likings, and something less in their antipathies. This young native had taken an impression and a measure, and had stored them in his mind against contingencies.

Paileret came off the bridge in a dancing dudgeon. It was no good staying there anyhow, and the slide of the water underneath made him dizzy. What was he to do ? There appeared nothing for it but to hang about until the two returned—an agitating prospect in that silent unfriendly place, with only the gloom of trees for company. It would seem a more sensible course to go back to the good fellowship of the inn, and retrace his steps later in the afternoon. The idea was no sooner broached in his mind than its practical application became irresistible. Faster than he had come, he sped back to the ‘ *Ship Aground*. ’

He spent a luminous hour or two there, and

learned incidentally—through the exercise of much superfluous cunning, on which he plumed himself—that there was a way over the hills to Maenol-y-Neuadd, which, if followed, would bring him down upon that hamlet from an unfrequented quarter. That there was any mischievous humour in the suggestion, as applied to a stranger who knew no more of the evil reputations of the neighbourhood than he guessed the disagreeable impression which he himself was making all the time upon his informants, never, of course, occurred to him. He thought only that, if any suspicion of his purpose should have been awakened in that remote place, here was the way to surprise his quarry by an unexpected descent upon it. Towards evening, full to the brim of the courage most libellously yclept Dutch, he started for the hills, being pioneered for the first part of his way by an (apparently) friendly villager, whom he had treated and patronised. The man left him, when he had launched him inextricably on his course.

They were all, in truth, instinctively disposed against him, these melancholy rough Cymric fellows. Perhaps the mystic in them recognised the debasing contact of such a nature. Anyhow they distrusted and misled him with an unconcocted unanimity. It had been so with the dark young native. He had not lied; but he had allowed a misunderstanding to go by default. Robin, he knew well enough, was in the woods above the ruined house all the time the other had been questioning. He had taken his book there and his parrot soon after the midday meal, leaving his comrade, by the



latter's wish, to a solitary tramp over the hills. Herne had mentioned the fact to the young fellow before starting, and had asked him to keep a general eye on things. That was why he had followed the stranger up the slope. He would have followed him, in the exercise of that duty, and despite a natural aversion from the task, into the very thickets of the haunted area, had not the stranger's retreat relieved him of the necessity. But still he remained alert, waiting for the return of one or other of the companions to yield up his post. And Herne, after all, was the first to appear. He came swinging down from the mountains, bright and breathed, when darkness was beginning to fall.

"Yo-ho, Robin, sonny!" he cried, as he toiled up the hill. "Where are you? Come out!"

A form emerged from behind a tree—that of the young native.

"Nid yw ef yn dyfod—he does not come from the woods, not yet, Mr. Herne," he said.

"Not?"

Herne's face fell a little. It was already deepening twilight. Not returned yet? Up there, all by himself, in that glooming solitude!

"Are you sure, Williams?" he asked.

"Sure," replied the man—"so sure as I watch by here since the coming of the stranger."

"The stranger? What stranger?"

"Cadnaw," said Williams—"he was like the fox, little and red, and he had been drinking."

Herne's heart seemed to stop.

"Williams," he said, scarcely above a whisper—

“what is all this ? Tell me in a word what has happened.”

Mr. Paileret, worming his way through bewildering undergrowths and deep woodland mazes of the hills, awoke to the sudden knowledge that he was lost. That damning conviction, when it had once fairly come home to him, found him completely demoralised. Remote from succour or stimulant, his flask near drained, hemmed in by shadows and wicked silences, he saw a night of unallayable horrors before him, and collapsed in the unspeakable prospect. How had he missed the track ? What had become of it ? He scurried hither and thither, with frenzied eyes and galloping heart, until he stumbled and fell among the bushes. But he was up again in a moment, and screeching like a maddened jay, until his quavering lungs gave out. His cries in those muffling solitudes carried no further than might those of a live man buried ; and, indeed, that was how he felt his situation. Such is one penalty of his form of self-indulgence. To find himself drinkless and benighted was to suffer a living damnation.

It had come upon him all at once, with the evaporation of the last fume of whisky from his brain. Only the muddy dregs remained there, sweltering and fermenting in their exhausted chambers. He was delivered to the apparitions exhaled from that poison ; he was entangled in the labyrinth of a hideous glimmering ghost-world ; he was cut off from all help or resource save what he might gain from his own frantic imagination.

Not a shred of will remained to him ; hardly a shred of reason.

How he cursed the confidence with which he had first accepted his guide's directions, rollicking off on his way under the driving-force of the liquid fuel within him, his head held high, his eyes like shining glass reflecting a happy prospect, his feet curiously uplifted, as the track reeled under them hardly touched in seeming ! Spurred by that demon, he had plunged into deep within deep of forest, going anyhow in his full assurance of emerging presently within sight of his goal ; only faltering once or twice over the thought of that final " nip " he was nursing in his flask against contingencies, until——

Until what ? He did not know what had wrought the change—the sense of horror had seized him all in a moment—he stopped, as if some low and fearful voice within the deeps had halted him.

All about him was dense and towering silence ; his feet were plunged in brushwood ; the track, if, indeed, track there had been, was completely gone ; the shadows of twilight were stooping under the trees.

For an instant he turned his startled glance hither and thither. On all sides was a thronged and seemingly impenetrable confusion of trunk and foliage. He took a panic step or two, and looked again. In that moment of nerve-paralysis every sense of his direction left him. He could not recognise whence he had come or whither was his way. But downhill—downhill, anyhow, must be



ultimate safety. He staggered, with failing knees ; pitched, rolled over, caught himself up desperately, and saw that another yard or two would have plunged him over the veiled lip of a deep and rocky quarry. As he rose, shaken and trembling, it seemed to him that an hour of twilight had gathered itself within the compass of a minute.

Then the last whiff of self-control blew from him, and he began to scream. He screamed until the echoes, answering and mocking, filled him with a new terror of the unseen demons he was calling from the depths. A fearful to-do about a small matter, one would think ; but reason knows not these bugbears. To the drunkard they have a way of inflating themselves beyond all natural proportions.

Now, urged on by terror, the man began to run. Constantly he tripped and crashed down ; but he was always on his feet in a moment and plunging forward again with sobbing breath and demented eyes. Chance presently led him to a part of the hill where the trees began to thin somewhat. He stopped, heaved out a quavering sigh, and then began to walk, with a ludicrous affectation of nonchalance which was quite belied by his shaking knees and spasmodic gait. But he could boast at least recovered nerve enough to jockey himself. His face flushed hot in the reaction.

It was of brief duration. Suddenly, beyond or within the twilight tangle ahead, he thought he caught the stir of something, and halted dead. What was it ? Even while he stared, a piercing whistle rent the stillness. It shrilled out clear,

and died, and was followed after an interval by a babble of unearthly laughter, which came and went as abruptly.

Paileret's hair stirred on his scalp ; he remained rooted to the spot where he stood.

The voice rose again—this time with a distinct enunciation. “George, George !” it screamed—“bully, George ! hullo, George !”

Involuntarily the watcher stepped back, catching at his forehead. The wet from it ran between his fingers ; but a new light had come to the eyes beneath. Very cautiously, then, with infinite finesse and cunning, he began to move forward—step by step, until he had emerged into a stately clearing, where a beaten path, or plateau, divided the trees of the hillside. And there he stood, a wicked devil of exultation transforming his face.

Beyond the woods, remote still, though reassuringly accessible, was all a yellow gloaming, which shone distantly between the massed trunks, diffusing a sombre twilight throughout the woodland corridors. Pale and uncertain as it was, it was enough to reveal the form of a boy sitting humped and huddled among the roots of an old beech tree, which straggled hugely down the upper slope and dug their claws into the soft mast of the plateau.

The form of a boy—him, the very object of his wild erratic search ! Paileret came out into the clearing, his teeth grinning like a cat's.

Robin had been reading, the parrot mounted sentry on his shoulder. Startled by the warning screech, alive on the instant to the lateness of the

hour and the densifying of the glooms about him, he had dropped his book and stirred as if to rise. In that instant he turned and saw the face.

A moment of paralysed stupor followed; and then, with one deadly scream, he was on his feet and running. With an answering roar, Paileret started in pursuit.

The boy ran above the path, dodging left and right of the trunks; the man, lithe enough and physically active, followed him hot-foot. Not more than fifty yards separated them; but the child was encumbered with his parrot which he had snatched down from his shoulder and was carrying in his arms. Paileret yelled curses as he pursued. A demon of fury was firing his blood. For all his efforts he did not seem to gain a step on his quarry.

Suddenly he tripped over a root, and fell with a stunning concussion. As he sat up, ordering his jumbled faculties, a quick wild cry came to him from a little distance ahead, and, instantly following it, a heavy splash—and silence. All the fire died out of him on the moment. He sat idiotically listening for more.

What had happened? Presently he staggered to his feet and stood listening again. Dead silence had re usurped the dead place. No voice, nor any receding patter came to his ears.

He felt instinctively for his flask—paused—removed his hand, and stole forward in a deathly horror. Anyhow that way must go his path; and the dusk was thickening.

Suddenly he came upon a great tank of black water sunk in the hillside. As he stood stupidly



gazing down upon it from above, he saw that the bushes on its verge were torn and the grass scarred as if from the passage of some body which had slipped there recently and gone over, clutching desperately in its fall. And a sluggish ripple still swung upon its surface.

He stepped back, with a gasp, raising his head. God in heaven ! What face was that conning him across the basin ? It hung, livid and evil, against the curtain of dusky foliage, its eyes like inky borings in a yellow skull, its mouth grinning and awry—a face of discoloured wax—the face of a dead man. And even while he looked it was gone—was a blot of ashen sky—was a figment of his own disordered imagination. Aghast with terror he turned and fled away. He saw the ruined roof of a house beneath him—dark windows—smokeless chimneys—his soul screamed as he passed them by, thinking the face behind him. And then the shapes of rotting byres, of toppling outhouses came about him ; and he flung himself through a doorway, and sank whimpering on the ground. He was quite prostrate and collapsed. Though it meant life to him he could not have run a step further under that hideous incubus. If he could only win to light and morning by whatever means !

With frantic hands he fetched out his flask and drained it. The drug so wrought upon him in his exhausted state that he shortly sank into a heavy stupor.

Fearful dreams visited him. He thought himself damned and condemned as a murderer, and he awoke with a scream after a night of horrors.

There was a man looking down upon him—a man whom he had seen before. He scrambled to his feet, and stood shivering and snarling and beating off the apparition. It advanced a step, piercing him with its eyes.

“Stand off,” he shrieked. “I didn’t kill him—before God I didn’t! He saw me, and ran, and fell into the water. I would have saved him if I could.”

On the word Herne, all claws and teeth, had sprung and caught him like a mouse.

## CHAPTER XXVI

*"It was she showed me where you were hid!"* A moment's silence followed that damning declaration. Then Herne took his foot off the prostrate creature where he lay writhing at Mrs. Merrivale's feet.

"Get up!" he said. His tone, quiet and deadly, sent a shiver through the wretched woman.

"Get up!"

Sullen and desperate, the shattered thing arose. He presented a pitiable aspect—hatless, filthy and dishevelled, his coat wrenched open at the shoulders, his collar half burst from his neck and twisted, as if he had been found hanging and cut down. His face was bruised and swollen, the veins in his eyes were congested, his little ragged red peak of a beard was clotted into a triple point with blood and dirt.

"She showed you?" said Herne. "Very well. She is to answer for that to herself, but you to me. Where was the water?"

The abject thing shrunk low; but, at a movement, cried out and pointed.

"Up there—I don't know where—on my honour I don't. It all passed in a moment. He was running before, and I heard a splash, and, in the same instant, fell over a root and half stunned



myself. And then presently, going on in the dusk, I saw the place—a hideous black pool, and only a ripple on it—no sign of him or anything. I would have saved him if I could—before God it's true. Why shouldn't I? My orders were to secure him alive, not dead."

"Your orders!"

Herne, like some mechanic executioner speculating on the parts most susceptible to torture, considered his captive with a roving deliberation. He was quite dehumanised for the time being—a soul, naturally sweet and reasonable, reverted and absorbed, through a sense of irremediable wrong, into the primitive beast which underlies all the philanthropic structure. The agony and weariness of a night spent in fruitless search burned in the very marrow of his bones; a fire of deadly passion glowed in his eyes and in the fever of his cheeks; his every nerve was strung to a murderous tension.

All through the mad hours of the dark he and others had been seeking and calling. Though he had persisted in despair, he had known from the first that it would be useless. Williams's description of the visitor had tallied only too surely with his own memory of the drunken stranger who had accosted him in *Caer Gollwyn*. He had known at once that some tragedy was afoot—some threatened disruption of the fool's paradise, in whose imaginary security he had allowed himself too long to assume an easy confidence. But that such a horror as this could come to end his anguish! He had thought of force, of coercion, of kidnapping—not once of death. And such a death! He pictured the

little thing—his mad fear, his mad struggles, all alone in that deadly haunted water, crying to him, Herne, perhaps, for the help he had not yet realised was even wanted. And he had gone under and been lying there, drowned and white and still, while as yet the alarm had only half awakened in his dear comrade's breast. No wonder that his still eyes and quiet voice made his listeners shudder. Paileret even uttered a little wincing cry, as if there had been some stab in the words.

“Speaking for Mr. Headstone,” he faltered—“the gentleman that's my employer. The boy was his stepson, which you may know or you mayn't. He ran away from home—from his natural guardian—and I was sent after to find him and bring him back. Let them that abetted him in his truancy hold themselves responsible for what's happened—not me ; I was only doing my duty.”

It may have been true enough, though he cringed as he said it, putting up an arm as if to ward off a blow. As his eyes looked under it, they saw the woman step quickly forward, and stop. Her head was leaned back, her lids were near closed, her hands trembled out towards the other, as if in a fainting appeal for mercy. Cold as marble, Herne saw the piteous figure, and passed it over, and spoke as if it did not exist for him.

“You were only doing your duty ? So were we all, I suppose—your employer ; you his creature ; I who thought to help and succour this poor waif of fortune thrown across my path ; she who betrayed us to his natural friends and guardians. Well, we have done him to death amongst us—an

admirable crew. It only remains to us to find him, and share the reckoning."

She fell upon her knees, with a heartrending cry :

"I bear it all—I am guilty of it all. If he is dead, I am his murderess."

He did not even turn her way. Her agony seemed to beat on stone-deaf ears. It was a horrible thing to see. He spoke again, measuring out his tones immovably :

"We were all in the right, it seems—strictly, according to our impeccable lights—all except the child himself. He alone is to blame for this mishap. I do not know his real name. He never told me, and I never asked. It matters nothing now—not to him. We can each call him as we please when we come to lay him in his grave and call the reckoning."

Even as he spoke, there came a sound of voices up the hill ; and in the same moment there appeared the figures of Lady Woodroffe and Hector Leveson, approaching in company of the villager whom Herne had despatched at an early hour to "Bryntyddyn," on the near hopeless off-chance of his discovering that Robin had been benighted and had found lodging there. The faces of all three looked pale and perturbed as they drew near, and came into close range of the strange spectacle presented to them. Much agitated, Lady Woodroffe hurried up to Herne, who moved a step or two to meet her. She seized his hands in hers.

"What is it ?" she said—"what has happened ? O, it must be something terrible ! Don't look like that !"



She pulled at his hands, taking hurried stock over her shoulder of her kneeling friend, of the little squalid and battered apparition lowering aside ; and her eyes came back pallidly to Herne's face.

"Robin !" she whispered, and choked and stopped.

He withdrew his hands from her clasp, gently but forcibly, and stepped back, with that glittering, stony expression unaltered.

"Yes, Robin," he said. "It was my name for him. I never knew his real one, I was saying when you came. We met by chance in some woods near Southampton. He was running away, and so was I. We agreed to run away together, and we came on here. We thought we were safe from pursuit and discovery ; and so we might have remained, had not Mrs. Merrivale felt it her duty to reveal, without previous warning to me, our hiding-place to that gentleman yonder, who, it seems, was hunting our tracks on behalf of his employer, the boy's stepfather. He hunted too closely, however, and last night, during my absence, drove his quarry into the pond up yonder, where the chase ended. There's nothing for us now but to go and drag the water."

He laughed, with a little shrug of his shoulders. It was ugly to see and hear him.

"Tudor," he said to the villager ; "I must place this gentleman in your charge, while we explore. He must bear witness to the truth of his own statement."

The man, square and menacing, moved over and

placed himself by Paileret's side. Lady Woodroffe was sobbing heavily, her hands before her face. Suddenly she lowered them, and, her cheeks wet and ghastly white, stepped to the kneeling woman and bent above her.

"Robin!" she whispered hoarsely—"a little child—as innocent as the love that cherished him was pure and unselfish. Are you satisfied now?"

Her malign looks, her envenomed tongue, might hardly find an untouched nerve of suffering in their poor victim to reward them with a start of pain. It was all numbness and dumbness there, irredeemable guilt and abasement, parched eyes and the merciful source of tears burnt dry.

"Are you satisfied?" repeated the cruel voice—"he was such a little thing—so easy to have ensnared and done to death. And so blameless, after all—no subject, even, for the shafts of righteousness—only a poor little runaway—a poor little wounded soul whom a good Samaritan had picked up by the road and carried into hiding. Are you satisfied? A saintly conscience, to be sure—an immaculate thing, to deal in treachery and murder for its proofs!"

*He* heard it all—even the irrepressible moan wrung from the tortured thing—and neither spoke nor moved to help her. But Hector Leveson, his great chest squaring like a bull's, limped up and placed a hand upon the prostrate woman's shoulder.

"Fie, fie!" said he; "is not this tragedy, if tragedy it is, enough to kill without recriminations? No sentence before conviction, Mistress, I stand to answer for my client here."

Lady Woodroffe swept back a pace, and stood hateful and deriding.

“To answer!” she cried—“a Jezebel can always find her spokesman at a price. She’ll pay you well, I daresay, for turning to such good account the confidences you’ve held together in my house. Answer for her, and answer for yourself.”

She turned, and turning again, addressed herself to Herne.

“Why are we waiting? Is it worth while wasting time on this? Look, my hands are steady—my nerves are like steel. Let me come with you and know the worst.”

A little group of villagers, returning heavy and sombre from their vain hunt over the hills, appeared that moment at the foot of the slope. Herne beckoned to Paileret’s gaoler, and, followed by Lady Woodroffe, went down to meet them. A minute or two later they had all disappeared, leaving Leveson and Mrs. Merrivale alone together.



## CHAPTER XXVII

“COME,” he said, “I am something heavy, and a cripple. Am I to kneel down by you?”

Clinging to his arm, hiding her face, she rose at once, and stood breathing in quick soft gasps. He put a hand on hers, where it held to him, and felt it as cold as death; but it struggled to escape the silent warm assurance.

“No,” she panted—“you mustn’t—I’m not—not what you think me, or want to think me. You heard what he said—it’s all true. I showed that man the way—not directly, but by allowing him to follow me. He wanted the little boy—wanted to find out where he was hidden, and I let him follow me.”

Leveson kept his grasp. His face was very grave, but full of commiseration.

“Well, why not?” he said. “Were you more in our friend’s confidence than the rest of us?”

She shook her head slightly.

“No—no—but I had a reason. I could not understand; I could not believe or disbelieve. He, the man, said that the child had run away—from some one who had a better right to him than—than the other. What right, I thought? It was all so strange and unhappy. But I wanted him gone—I wanted him gone.”

Her head sank low, and her cheek was flushed hot in the acuteness of her shame. Leveson's eyes were full of pity. He believed that he understood ; but what words could he find meet to such an occasion. This "affair of the heart" must have been developing for long under his eyes, and he had never guessed the truth until yesterday. Well, it was a lesson to his own philandering self-complacency.

"Not like this," she went on feverishly—"in mercy's name don't dream such a wickedness of me. I thought, perhaps, he would be relieved—glad, to be helped out of an entanglement, against his heart, but not against his will. And they had used it so to torture me with—to turn me against him. And when they found that they could not succeed, that I still believed in him, they said horrible things—they accused me—" she broke off with a gasp, and, tearing her hands away, hid her face in them.

He stood gazing at her, with infinite indignation in his heart. Who "they" were he comprehended well enough. Suddenly she looked up, her breast heaving, her eyes flashing liquid fire ; and he welcomed the springing of those waters.

"Why does not God wither slanderous tongues ?" she cried. "Why must innocence soil its own hands to prove its cleanness ? Is truth so grudged in heaven ! That I should have been driven to this shameful necessity to vindicate it—to entreat my only advocate, and to make myself a new mark for calumny with every step !"

"Ah, my poor lady !" said Leveson. "You

must remember that heaven's human if transcendent. We go there when we're good. 'Tis the drawing-room to this servants' hall below—social promotion, more gentleness and culture, but still the old tendency, to find spots in the sun. But I understand. You were on your way to him."

"Too late," she mourned. "I had not known—I had not guessed. He came upon me as you found us. He will never vindicate or forgive a murderess."

He uttered an exclamation, scornful and inspiring.

"Folly all ways!" he cried. "Who even knows that the child is dead!"

She seemed to catch her breath in a quick spasm; she raised her face and gazed at him in a sort of rapt terror.

"No," she whispered—"no. How can you be so cruel! I thought you were my friend."

"God witness it!" said he. "What is this man's evidence, it seems? If he saw him go in, why didn't he pull him out?"

"O, if you are only saving me for a worse torture!" she sighed. "Mr. Leveson! He fell, he told us, and half stunned himself, and, sitting there, he heard the splash. And presently he went on, and saw—no, no, it is too lovely to be true."

Yet in an instant she had leapt at him, and had clasped urgent white hands on his breast—an abject fawning creature.

"Will you not go," she implored, "and find out, and come back and tell me? O, yes! I know you



will—and kill me with a look, or give me back to life—life? Robin! the little child—the little loving child! O, he would forgive me if I prayed to him—if I kissed his hands and knelt and prayed to him—to break my heart—it loved him really—always it did—Mr. Leveson, they must have discovered by now.”

Her knitted hands pressed against him; but he hesitated, while still she moaned and entreated.

“Go, go! They *must* have found out by now!”

At length he stirred, and sighed.

“To leave you by yourself?”

“I can bear it,” she said—“I can bear it with that hope for company.”

One moment he gazed at her earnestly; then, with heavy feet turned and limped down the hill. A hot weight was at his heart. What if his sturdy optimism, his intense desire to comfort and reassure, should prove themselves the cruellest of kindnesses? God pity a sanguine temperament! It was the thing responsible in the world for many a fall from unjustified elations. Better, perhaps, to be a mopus and croak despair. A little above the worst became always, then, such a magnified blessing.

Very sombrely, grunting and blowing, he stumped down, and at the bottom of the slope came upon a little knot of wives gathered from their cottages to discuss the tragedy. There were wet eyes and voluble speech amongst them; some held their aprons to their mouths, for often, in moments of emotion, women have a way of so closing those vents to hysteria. But they were all silent when

he came amidst them and asked his direction ; which having signified, they broke upon him with one voice, and wrought confusion.

However, in the result he understood that there was an old disused bridle-path up the hill, which would take him round by the back of Maes-y-Myrddyn, past the ruined stables, and out upon the woodland plateau with its fateful water-head ; and thither he made his way, laboriously following in the tracks of the party that had gone just before. Too preoccupied to feel or dread the spirit of utter desolation which reigned throughout the deserted place, he hurried forward, and in a little saw through the trees the figures of those he sought. They were many and nervously occupied. Coming out into the open, he leaned a minute or two for rest against a trunk, and silently watched the proceedings.

There were six or seven men there from the neighbourhood, swart dark-eyed fellows, with long arms, and elastic brown muscles, and faces as if carved out of teak ; and they were already at work raking out the weed from the pool. They wrought in a tense hurrying silence, for the gravity of the occasion alone had induced them to the desecration of a place so traditionally associated among them with fear and avoidance.

On the slope of the ground just above the basin stood Herne, and, a little apart from him, Lady Woodroffe. Paileret, slinking and shivering, watched furtively, in custody of his resolute gaoler, from the path below.

The upper two of these faces stood out, white and deathly under the gloom of tree and sky, like

human lamps held up to direct the workers. Their light seemed to come from within—to glisten through unearthly eyes—to suggest something fearful and unseemly preparing behind closed blinds. Once, Leveson believed, Lady Woodroffe looked his way, with a frown of quick inquiry ; but she never moved her head—nor did Herne his. He stood, grey and staring, with a smile, such as was never known to mirth, frozen on his lips and teeth.

Nothing broke the stillness but the swish of the long rakes as the men pulled at the weed. It lay thick and deep, an immemorial mat of growth, and they tore it out in heavy tresses. Sometimes a tangled fish, looping and struggling, would come up with a load, animating the dead green with a sudden start of silver that made the raker wince ; sometimes the landed slime with heaving birth-throes would labour out a sprawling frog, which sat and goggled with yellow eyes jewelling the pollution. From these things, as from some nameless spawn of wickedness, the men would shrink away, neither touching nor killing, and return set-faced to their work. The weed all through was so deep and dense, that not until its last growth had been uprooted or explored could they make sure of what lay sunk, or not sunk, beneath.

Two villagers in the meanwhile had been despatched for a force-pump ; and this was presently brought up and into action, the workers manipulating it strenuously in couples and in turn. It effected more in a short time than all the efforts of the rakers. As the water rushed and gurgled down the hill, it fell correspondingly in the basin,



until, at the end of an hour, not more than a foot deep of it, slopped with sunk weed and mud, was left at the bottom.

And then, in a momentary pause, Herne stirred and spoke.

“Give me a rake.”

No one responding immediately, he uttered a sharp exclamation of impatience, and at once, moving quickly but with care, let himself down into the sodden pool, and, plunging in his arms to the shoulders, began tearing up the weed and heaving it over the rim, neck-high, of the reservoir. In a moment, then, others had followed his example, and, while the pump still worked, laboured, with rake and fist, to keep pace with it.

Suddenly one of them gave a quick little cry of terror, and, staggering slightly, stood up with a whitish object held out in his hand.

“Duw celi!” he cried, in a lamentable voice—  
“O, mawr yw’r trueni—O, it is a great peety!”  
and he held the thing out at arm’s length.

Another bent forward and peered:

“Brysiwch! It is a child’s little skull.”

Herne came erect to a panic shock. In the same instant he recognised the absurdity of his fear, and stooped to dive again; but paused a moment, with bent shoulders. All over and about the basin the men had stopped work, and were standing glaring at the unchancy treasure-trove. The finder held his prize aloft.

“No child’s, but an ape’s,” he cried in shrill terror. “Aha! Aha! it is Gwynfren’s murdered heir!”—and he threw the thing down and away

from him, with a gesture of abhorrence. Instantly he and his comrades, one and all, began to scramble out of the pit. Herne tried to stop them.

“A little more, only a little more, good fellows ! You won’t fail me at the last.”

He stood alone in the tank.

“Look out for that man !” cried Lady Woodroffe suddenly.

Paileret was writhing and fighting convulsively in his gaoler’s arms. His blotched visage was distorted with horror.

“The face !” he screamed—“the face ! It is moving down into the water !”

There was foam on his lips ; he sank down in a heap, and lay twitching and moaning.

Quite unmoved from his purpose, Herne stood, entreating, commanding. Not a man stirred. They stood all huddled together, with blanched cheeks and knees unstrung.

Suddenly Lady Woodroffe moved from her position, and, coming round to the front of the reservoir, caught at the pump-handle. Seeing what she would be at, Leveson joined her. Together they laboured, and the water gushed forth afresh. Herne, seizing an abandoned rake, wrought like a madman.

Then one or two, shamefaced and sullen, came to the help of the couple, setting fierce arms to their task. Soon the pump sucked, and gave out ; and there was only a residue of weedy slush, alive with struggling fins, left to negotiate on the floor of the basin.

. . . . .

Herne issued at last from the pit. He was masked with filth to the shoulders; a spot of brilliant colour had come to his either cheek; in his arms he held a little heap of bones, slimy and stained with green. He laid these down, very gently, on the tank-edge, and walked across to Paileret. They had propped the man against a tree, where he sat staring and moaning feebly. The other looked down on him, without any sign of emotion.

“He is not there,” he said. “What is the truth about him?”

The wretched creature heard, and his lids flickered.

“I have told you all I know,” he said presently in a thick voice.

The moral seemed to seize him in a moment, and he glanced up, with a snarl of malevolence.

“We’ve got our reckoning to come for this, you devil,” he said. “You’ve got to answer for him to me—not I to you.”

Suddenly he was on his feet, tottering and raging.

“Supposing it’s all a blind,” he screeched, “and you’ve got him hidden and thought to throw the blame on me. Where is he? I’ll have it out of you, by God!”

But in the same moment he reeled, and fell again. Herne stood conning him, as he might have some obscene chimera which he had shot and brought down.

“Where is he?” he murmured reflective, rubbing his chin. “Aye, that’s the question. In the woods; in the town; on the mountains? Wherever it



may be, helpless, and terrified, and exhausted, I fear."

He turned about.

"Our labours only begin again, my friends," he said. "We have found where he is not; it remains to discover where he is. A frail little soul, my friends—a poor weak little fellow—not one to be left to wander by himself in terror and despair."

He put a hand momentarily to his eyes. As he lowered it, a woman's lips were bent to touch it with a balm of pity.

In the meanwhile Hector Leveson, jubilant, if a little unnerved, was limping, with all the speed he could muster, down the hill. He hurried to carry the tidings of salvation to a very stricken young friend; he chafed over the long delay; his heart beat with a rich warmth, half humorous, half melancholy. Well, he was a disinterested Paladin. It was the only part left him to play in these practical romances. And perhaps he could not wish it otherwise. If it excluded certain raptures, it excluded certain responsibilities. It was the sort of knight-errantry that could still find a relish, when the day's work was done, in the champagne and ortolans to which there was no question of sentiment or domestic economies to say nay. And, anyhow, he could always dream very sweetly on champagne.

He bellowed the good news through the hamlet as he passed, and then made for the hill. It was a trying climb to one so handicapped by emotion and bodily infirmity; but he did not know of the

shorter cut by the house. As he topped the slope, his eyes sought eagerly for the figure he had left an hour earlier to await his return. It was not there. Neither above nor below was there any sign of it. He stood, and stared about him, and called. Not an answer, not a sound, came back to him.

What had happened? Whither had she gone?

A great silence and dreariness encompassed him about. The house with its blind white windows leered down at him. He felt that he could not stay there the sole cynosure of its sinister regard. He moved uneasily hither and thither, peering and shouting—all to no effect.

Presently he returned to the hamlet, and made inquiries. No, no one had seen the lady pass that way. Quite nonplussed, he mounted the slope again, and went hailing and exploring as before.

At length, wearied out, he was driven to desist, and to seek temporary rest in one of the cottages below.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

WHITHER had she gone? Where none, indeed, would have dreamt of seeking her—over the threshold of a living death. It had come about in this way.

At first, and for long minutes after she was left alone, the rapture of her late uplifting had sustained her in those unreal heights. Her brain, emancipated from its utmost horror, seemed to swim in a glorified ether; she touched earth only with the feet of a disembodied spirit; it appeared to her that, were she to bend her knees, she would kneel, literally, on air, like some ecstatic anchorite in a devotional picture.

Very gradually, then, the luminosity of her mood paled, its intoxication evaporated into thin air, and she came to the ground with a shock. The progress of her fall answered inversely to that of her rise; it increased in exact proportion as the other had slackened. Moreover, in accordance with the law of moral, as of natural, physics, she was obliged, in her return to earth, to retrace every point of her ascent. The poor wretch felt her hell approaching before she was flung back into it.

She stood as if paralysed. The self-consciousness she had momentarily escaped, was restored to her,



a hundredfold debilitated. It was all false fire—an unjustified hope, and she was condemned to agonise through an indefinite time for the sentence which, at its very worst, would come as a mercy. How could she wait—how endure it? A panic terror constricted her nerves, seeming to suffocate her heart. A minute or two of this, and she must die. Where could she go—what do? She must control herself somehow.

On the threshold of that collapse, a sudden thought of the power of will, as a force capable even of triumphing over organic disorder, occurred to save her. She caught, gasping, at the straw. Will! Whence did it come? how was it to be created out of a whirling shapeless chaos? By self-abstraction, to be sure. The first tremors of that birth awoke logically on the instant. She had created something in herself independent of the chaos—the will to think on will.

A tiny seed at first; but, as it grew, it made its own atmosphere, and flourished tremblingly in it. And presently it came to the age of reason; and presently to sad maturity; and she could dwell, woefully but calmly, on the tragedy of things.

So, for the preservation of her sanity, she must insist on regarding it. There was no real hope on which to build her future. She had to consider that from the point of view of its remorse, its irremediable regrets, its possible ways to redemption. He would never speak to her again, never look her way, never acknowledge her existence. How could she wish him too?—that most sweet page of her life was closed down for evermore.

And so, what next? What asylum, what retreat for her stricken soul?

Now, perhaps for the first time in her life, her gentle orthodoxy turned, with a thrill of yearning, towards the pastoral cloisters of the land of her adoption. Might she not find there the forgiveness, the passioning rest which her colder creed must always deny her? The peaceful incense of that mysticism seemed to float into her brain from afar; she saw the white hot walls, and heard the chapel bell tinkle. To be a nun—the bride of Christ—what did it matter on what terms of dogmatism? Christ Himself, Herne had said, was no Christian.

Herne! His name brought her back from that dream with a shudder of despair. She looked up. What strange influence had crept about her while she brooded? It seemed almost as if in evoking that shred of will she had challenged the authority of another more formidable. It was expressed about her in the dark drift of the skies, in the bulking of the heavy trees, in all the preternatural gloom and stillness of that ruined place.

Suddenly she thought that she was not alone—that something was watching her. The horror of her isolation in that haunted spot came upon her all in a moment, prickling on her skin in a fine perspiration. Her eyes opened wide with fear.

Something *was* watching her—the house. The *will* proceeded thence, to hold, and madden her, and kill her with the intensity of its wickedness. All at once it appeared to take form and movement; to issue and run along the terrace in a

green streak. She gazed fascinated. The indescribable thing dipped, and squatted, and in the same instant was gone. She wanted to cry out, to escape ; but terror froze her utterance ; her nerves of motion were locked as in a nightmare.

Right opposite and above her was the door of the building. It had a jagged rent in its lower panels, like a mouth awry. As she looked, the green streak seemed to shoot out of this gap, to flicker a moment or two as before, and, as before, to disappear like a tongue withdrawn. In the same instant a phenomenon, strange and new in that forsaken place, caught her attention. It was nothing more than the apparition of a hawk or kestrel hovering over the broken roof. It hung poised like a watching spider on an invisible web ; but suddenly she remembered that local superstition was persistent in holding the accursed place to be shunned alike of fowl and beast.

Now, as if some veil in her brain had been rent, light seemed to rush in on her, and with it a thought so wild and poignant, that she uttered a cry as of a castaway who sees land. And the next moment, instead of fleeing from the spot, she was mounting the shattered steps of the terrace and hurrying towards the house.

It was the impulse of an inspiration—to wrest life from despair, or yield her soul for ever to its shadows. She gave herself no time for thought—drove straight upon the gloating terror—dropped upon her knees within the very leprous contagion of the walls—bent her lips to the panel.

“ Robin ! Robin ! ” she cried in a voice of agony.



The name seemed to reel and rollick through the hollows of vast chambers—to be returned upon her in a multitude of tinkling echoes.

“Robin!” she cried again; and paused to listen, with all her soul at the opening.

Something answered—something, she was sure—a little voice, speculative, bantering, incoherent, all in one. She cried once more, and once more listened.

Suddenly her hands were clutching and tearing madly at the broken wood-work. It cracked, complained, and came away in them, leaving a gap sufficient for her to creep through.

Her trembling limbs and hurrying voice could hardly command themselves as she stooped to the essay.

“I’m coming,” she cried—“where are you? O, my little Robin, try to speak up and tell me!”

With the words she was in, torn and dishevelled, but with a joy at her heart beyond all telling. For the moment impenetrable darkness seemed to hold her—darkness made only more palpable by the gush of grey light which, entering by the shattered panel, streamed about her knees and along the floor. But very quickly the glooms began to grow diluted, to glimmer into softening patches, and to reveal the outlines of a wide square hall, panelled with antique oak.

The floor beneath her feet struck cold and spongy; she did not dare to move—“Robin!” she whispered again, the tears rising to her eyes.

And he answered—he answered. O, God be thanked!—very weak and small—somewhere from

down on the floor, it seemed. Hesitating no longer, quite overcome with joy and emotion, she hurried to where a thinnest string of light showed the presence of a window in the wall, and, feeling for the fastenings, struggled to open them. But, in the midst of her efforts, the little thin voice spoke again and arrested her hands.

"I'm coming," she panted. "Give me one moment—only one moment!"

She could hardly distinguish the weak cry :

"Don't let him take me."

"Don't"—a wild sob wrenched her bosom. Her heart felt as if it would break. "Nobody shall take you—my darling, nobody shall take you. You are quite safe now. O, Robin, Robin, if I could only get this open!"

It snapped and came away on the word; the rusty bar clanged down; she flung open the shutter, and light burst into the hall. It seemed to pause there on its entrance, grey and arrested like a sleep-walker who wakes to find himself in an unfamiliar place; but soon it was conscious and triumphant. It fell upon mildewed wainscotting, upon rotting boards, upon a low ceiling, with a great gash in its middle from which a heap of lath and plaster had fallen—and something with them—something about which a green streak ran circling and dipping, a form eternally restless and agitated—that of Ferdinand the parrot. And then she saw him, and gave a sob of rapture.

He was so whitened by the lime, so entangled in the wreckage, the poor little elf, that, for one panic moment, distinguishing nothing but that

ruin, she believed herself made the sport of some fiendish cantrip. But the next, with an exclamation of transport, she was down on her knees by the tumbled rubbish.

“Poor little fellow,” she wept—“O, poor, poor little fellow! What is it all? What has happened? O, Robin! we thought you had fallen into the pool and been drowned.”

She put out a hand and touched him, ever so gently, ever so lovingly; but he gave a feeble cry.

“Not there! My arm is broken!”

For one moment, utterly distraught between horror and pity, she sank back helpless; but the need for self-control, for the tenderest and most practical form of sympathy, came to restore her directly. She considered her resources, feminine but timely, the child's position, the least hurtful way of appropriating it to her ministrations. She suffered with him, and studied his ease accordingly, true womanly creature that she was. The first essential, the first mercy to him, was to subdue her own emotions.

She coned the confused heap, and saw that he lay so embedded in it that, by the cautious removal of certain superincumbent litter, she could leave him lying undisturbed as on a bed. Very softly, then, with infinite care, she removed, piece by piece, crumb by crumb, the overlying wood and plaster. As she wrought, she became aware that his clothes were heavy with a sop of mingled lime and water, and that there was a streak of blood on his forehead.

“Don't speak—don't say a word,” she whispered, much moved; “but pinch me at once if I hurt you.”



His eyes, wide and unearthly, followed her movements in silence. Presently, having freed him as far as was practicable, she rose, and stepped aside out of their range.

“One minute,” she said. “Please—don’t try to look my way.”

Her hands dropped hurriedly to her skirts. A moment she looked about her, breathing quickly, a “rosy pudency” on her cheeks. Nothing was there to observe her, unless the spirits of the place. She cared for them no longer ; her fingers whipt to her inner waist ; in a little she came back to the bed, shamefaced, with a petticoat of warm flannel held behind her back. She slid it unobserved to the floor.

And now began the serious business. She took a pair of folding scissors from a silver chatelaine which hung at her side, and proceeded, with a touch of heavenly skilfulness, to cut away his clothes. Seam by seam, gusset by gusset, she ran them through, and, as each piece fell detached, withdrew it with butterfly fingers and cast it aside, while as systematically Ferdinand secured the fragments, and disposed them helpfully in a corner. Brave bird ! ’Twas he, after all, deserved the first honours for this rescue. His reward, and enough, was the pale ghost of a smile his master vouchsafed to his proceedings.

But the poor arm it was that called for deftest handling ; and the child never winced—not once. She shuddered as she laid it bare, and saw the white thing purple and out of drawing. It was broken above the elbow, and all below was numb ; but

here her ignorance might not venture, and all she could do was to pad it softly round against the help to come.

More than once as she wrought, intensely absorbed in her task, the sound of her own name, distantly uttered, had seemed to echo in the dreamy chambers of her brain. She was hardly conscious of the impression while it lasted, and afterwards, recalling it, believed it to have been merely some delusion of her excited imagination, a note wafted to her from "the spirit ditties of no tone." Her days latterly had been so full of strange voices.

Now the young body lay beneath her, smooth as a marble figure resting amid the dust and chips of its own creation; and she took the warm kirtle, and with the gentlest motion drew it over all. And then with her fine handkerchief, as soft as a bird's-wing, she wiped the dried blood and lime from the boy's forehead, and touched it sweetly with a little eau-de-cologne sprinkled from a tiny cut-glass bottle drawn from the same chatelaine; and she put the bottle to his lips moreover, and bade him swallow a drop or two, which made the red come to his pale cheeks.

"And now," she murmured, "will you lie quietly, while I go for help?"

Help! He had spoken no coherent word, but for those first cries of distress and pain, since she had found him. But the drops of spirit had lent him strength and voice. He gave a little whimper, and turned troubled eyes to her.

"Don't go—don't leave me alone."

The hoarseness of the entreaty smote upon her heart. She sat herself down on the boards beside him, and looked wistfully into his face.

“Of course not, if you wish it, and can endure to wait.”

“Yes ; if he doesn’t come.”

“He will not come—believe it, believe it, darling. He is a prisoner—the village is all aroused—they would kill him if he tried. Try to go to sleep. Don’t talk. I will promise not to leave you.”

“I want to talk. It will make me feel better. I have been lying here alone all night.” He saw her shudder. “It was better than being caught by him,” he said.

“Who is he ? ” she asked in a whisper.

“He used to be my stepfather’s servant,” said the boy—“a sort of factotum. His name is Paileret. My stepfather was a schoolmaster once, and he was his servant. There were stories about them, I know—they did cruel things—and the school had to be given up. But Paileret remained on with my stepfather as his servant. He is always drinking and seeing things. He used to come into my room at night, and hide behind the curtains, and creep out on me in the dark, so that I nearly went mad. Then he got so bad that he was sent away—for ever, I thought, until I saw him yesterday, and knew that he had been sent after me. You won’t let me be given up ? ”

Given up ? She would do murder with her own hands first ; and she told him so. A shining softness came into his eyes.

“I knew you never really hated me,” he said.



She leaned towards him with a choking in her throat.

"Hated you! O, Robin!"

"I was in the way, that was all," he said. "I told Herne so. I wonder if he understood as I did. He is very fond of you, you know."

She shrunk away again.

"Is he?" she murmured.

"How can he help it?" said the boy. "I couldn't, although——"

He paused. "Although I was so hateful to you, Robin," she answered for him. "We haven't all your understanding, you love; but, O! I hope he will come to forgive me now!"

"For what?"

She hung her head.

"I must say it, however it may hurt you and myself. It was I, Robin, who showed the man where you were living. Now kill me with your pretty scorn."

He turned his face, and looked at her, wondering, for a while.

"You wanted me out of the way?" he said presently.

"Kill me," she said again.

"But you didn't know—you didn't mean me any harm?"

"O, no, no!"

"That's it," he said. "Who *could* know? But it was you who came and found me. I think, perhaps, I should have died if you hadn't. How did you find me?"

"I was standing down there, all alone, and I

saw Ferdinand. He ran out through the hole in the door. I didn't understand at first ; but something seemed to draw me, and I came."

" Weren't you frightened ? "

" Yes, horribly."

" You see ? This scent is so nice. It is just what I should have expected of you. Why were you alone down there ? "

" It is too long to explain. The others had all gone to drag the pool of water. They are doing it now. He had come upon that man—that horror—and had forced the truth from him—that he had heard you fall in."

" I did ; but I was out again directly. Ferdinand had stuck in the bushes when I slipped, and I caught him up and ran on. I thought Paileret was just behind me ; and suddenly I saw a great mat of briar that stretched over to a window, and I dodged across it, and found the window unlatched, and opened it and got in. I was too frightened to think or care. I just pulled the window down again softly, and scuttled into the house. And then all of a sudden I went through. The floor just crashed underneath me, and I fell here in a heap. I heard my arm break, and it hurt."

" O, Robin ! "

" It was funny. I thought I should have been crazy lying here ; but the pain was bad, and I forgot to be. Everything seemed to go queer, and I thought of nothing but my arm. It was good luck that Ferdinand wasn't knocked to pieces. I expect it was he that kept off the ghosts."

He had no word of reproach for her. Her eyes were thick with tears.

“ You make me want to cry,” she said ; “ but I mustn’t. Mayn’t I open the door ? It might lead them to find us.”

The look of distress came back to his face.

“ Supposing Paileret were the first to see it ? ”

“ He won’t be, darling—he can’t. And, even if he did, the others would not let him come near you. He is much more terrified now than you are. Mr. Herne nearly killed him when he heard what he had done.”

The boy smiled weakly, and murmured, “ Dear Herne ! ”

“ Yes,” she said ; “ and think of his agony all this time, Robin, believing you drowned.”

“ Please open the door,” he said.

She rose at once, and went swiftly, and attacked the rusty lock and bolts. They made harsh work for her tender hands ; but the strong will in her prevailed, and presently the door swung open with a dismal screech.

When she returned to the boy, he was drowsing. Relief from the long strain had drugged his brain, and in a little he was asleep. She sat beside him on the floor, motionlessly happy. The parrot waddled forth, and aired himself sedately on the terrace. It was only by degrees that the sense of her waking solitariness in the haunted building crept upon her. A double flight of stairs, sombre and squat-balustered, entered the hall, right and left, at its furthest limits. She found herself casting stealthy looks at these with an air of uneasy



expectancy. Sounds, presently, seemed to wake on the floor above—low creakings and treadings, a rushing scrape, as of a heavy box being pulled over the boards—noises, in suggestion, like the hurried preparations of some one packing for a journey.

She fought to reassure herself with the tales she had heard told of rats, and of how their scamperings were magnified through empty houses, but fear mastered her will. Little by little the strain increased upon her until it reached near the limits of her endurance.

Then all in a moment the sounds ceased.

She looked at the stairs—she rose in an awful horror to her feet—she tottered towards the open door—and at that moment there came the sound of voices and of people approaching round the house-side. She heard the parrot squawk—an answering shout—the tread of footsteps hurrying along the terrace ; and all at once her brain seemed to give, and she reeled where she stood and slipped down by the wall.

When she came to her senses, she was lying on a sofa in a little room of the hamlet, and a man was bending over her. He was a small man, with a heavy bullet head and black moustache, and she recognised him at once for the Tal-y-sarn doctor.

“That’s right,” he said ; “keep your end down, and your tongue quiet, and drink this.”

He put a glass to her lips ; but she pushed it aside and struggled to rise.

“Where,” she began—“what has happened—how long——?”

“There, there,” he expostulated—“not more

than ten minutes, on my word. They carried you down, and here, by the first of luck, was I calling on Mrs. Wynn's brat. Now be reasonable, and let me get back to the other."

She pressed the cobwebs from her brain. Light was beginning to come in.

"O, go!" she said in anguish—"not me first. Why did you leave him?"

"I left him in good hands, and plenty," said the doctor; "and I took a squint of him first. He'll do, till I can superintend his packing and carrying. Not the worst of harm, but enough. You're a brave lady, I may tell you. We're going to carry him to the hall. No quarters here for an invalid."

She lifted herself shakingly on one hand.

"Don't let him see Mr. Paileret."

"No fear," said the doctor. "Williams and another have got the worm in charge, and not to be produced till called upon. Now, will you lie quiet?"

"O, yes, yes! Go to him."

"You'll not get up till I bid you?"

"No. I promise."

"That's a wise soul. There's a good woman here I'll send in. You've saved the boy—remember that, and sleep on it."

## CHAPTER XXIX

SLEEP on it ! Could such joy and thankfulness as were hers dream of squandering their precious moments on unconsciousness ? “ Long drawn out,” rather, be their “ linked sweetness ! ”

She lay, with half-shut eyes and smiling lips, in bliss indescribable. What a heavenly convalescence from tormenting fevers was this ! She loved all the world ; had not a harsh criticism, hardly an uneasy thought for it in those first moments of her ecstasy. This being right, everything would be right.

“ *He is very fond of you, you know !* ” Her spirit soared on the rapture of those artless words. Dear unsophisticated little soul ! How had he repaid base suspicion and unkindness with forgiveness ! She had hurt her own hand in wounding him, and it was he who had brought the salve to cure it. Her pride was humbled very low. She could submit herself now with more than resignation, with a passionate surrender, to the sharpest atonement which he, that other, might exact of her. If only he would make her feel the vengeance of those strong arms to which she would yield herself—and feel her own helplessness in them. She thought she understood the emotions of that woman who would turn to kiss the hand that bruised her.



Perhaps he would feel pity for the thing he hurt, and, out of pity—what ?

A darker shadow drifted across the sky. She could hear outside her window the excited gossip of the hamlet, discussing the hundred details of the drama still developing in its midst. Presently the sound of an approaching motor came to her ears. It stopped hard by, throbbing and rattling ; fell silent in a moment ; was succeeded by the soft multitudinous tramp of footsteps coming down the hill. Then a long quiet ensued ; the thumping reawoke ; there was a snap and whir, and the voices grew into volume again in the wake of the receding rush. Gradually they thinned, dispersed, the place was returned to its pristine quiet, and a pleasant, dark-faced woman looked into the room, and asked softly and deferentially if her “ leddyship ” required anything.

No, it appeared ; save the assurance that all had gone off well. She was comforted on that score. The young gentleman had borne his removal like a hero. He had been carried off to the hall in the doctor’s and Mr. Herne’s charge, and her leddyship and the big troedgam gentleman had followed on foot. As for the little foxy man, he was under guard for the present, and for all his indignant protests, at Pennal’s farm under the whin.

She would have liked to linger and talk things over ; but Mrs. Merrivale, with ineffable sweetness, dismissed her. She thought she could sleep, she said, the deceitful hussy, and begged not to be disturbed until she herself should call. The woman withdrew, respectful but disappointed.

So ended the act. The curtain of cloud which had fallen upon it seemed to find her soul a little darkened. The lights were down all of a sudden, and the exhilaration of her mood subdued. A certain void and lifelessness, where had been so much agitation a moment ago, struck her like a chill. Perhaps, in the depths of her soul, interpreting all things by the light of her own great relief and repentance, she had nourished the hope that her part in this rescue, even in the first emotion of things, would have met with some recognition, been held a little to exculpate her. And she was utterly ignored and abandoned, it appeared. He could not find it in his heart even to affect that condonation of her offence which a single kind word, a single conciliatory look might have seemed to palliate overmuch.

Even Hector Leveson kept away—subscribed, it seemed, to the common verdict. She felt his desertion acutely, being ignorant of the fact that the good man was all oblivious of her neighbourhood. He had, as a matter of fact, limped off, after his temporary rest, to rejoin the exploring party by the path he thought they would take in returning. The sound of the approaching motor had been the first intimation to him of a crisis in the development of affairs. He had hurried back only in time to witness the departure of the car, but not to gather any information as to his own lost one, whose share in the proceedings Lady Woodroffe had persistently ignored; and he had been forced to the conclusion that, unable to endure the long strain of suspense, she had wandered

away, or, perhaps, had returned by the upper path to "Bryntyddyn." But all that was unknown to the sufferer, and she read in his secession only another proof of the unanimity of her judges. She was to be left to ruminate, in grief and loneliness, the completeness of her ostracism. That a great tragedy had been averted was nothing to her credit. That was true; yet it was as true, she believed, that the boy might have died before another than herself would have dared, or even been moved to consider, the possibilities of that dread place where he had fallen. It had been a terrible time—an unspeakable experience—and her heart cried out for the pity of that small acknowledgment which her sufferings deserved to win. Her sufferings! Who could have suffered from the first as she had?

Yet, perhaps, *he* knew nothing of all this—had gathered nothing of the actual facts from the broken utterances of his little comrade. She prayed that it might be so. It was likely enough, in the joy and agitation and confusion of the occasion. Lady Woodroffe herself would most certainly have striven to divert his thoughts from any such understanding. It would have been the last from her interests to concede so much to the credit of a rival.

O, a rival! that horrible thought! It must not be; it must be made, one way or the other, to end for ever. For the moment she had secured the complete mastery of things—was using, no doubt, to their fullest effect, all those weapons of helpfulness, of sympathy, of frank indignation and



covert innuendo which fortune had placed in her hands. And she loved the man, according to her lesser lights of passion—was clean, at least, of treason to him. No scruples in such women where they hungered. They would tread on the mouth of innocence itself to reach their desire.

What wild thoughts to follow on such rapture ! But the loneliness of this imprisonment, while all her world of hopes and dreams was disporting itself, regardless of her, at a distance, told upon the poor soul pitifully as the hours drew on and no one came to release her. And then a new fear awoke, rending her bosom. What if the case had proved more complicated and dangerous than at first supposed—what if the child's injuries had proved fatal ? At that she cried out to Heaven, and, slipping to her knees, prayed like one who feels the fire of hell upon his cheek. If this went, nothing remained to her—not even the last right to entreat her love to restore her name its honour. She must use her shame to her atonement—she must never pray again except to pray for death.

Her words issued in a scurry of sobs and ejaculations. They were heard by the good woman of the house, who ran in, and insisted—here being her right womanly province—upon understanding and mothering. Mrs. Merrivale cried herself quiet on the kindly breast ; her mood was all attributed to this long strain of unsatisfied expectancy ; she swallowed food and milk obediently when told. Her hostess had slipped in, unobserved, a thimbleful of brandy, and the spirit wrought gradually upon the exhausted brain. Presently the poor dear

nodded and was asleep. The good mother sat beside her, and adored, with stealthy fingerings, the quality of her garments. It was a pleasure which somewhat physicked the pain of baffled curiosity.

Suddenly the restored thing awoke, opening her eyes to an instant understanding. It was late afternoon, and the doctor stood beside her. A glance at his face was enough.

"He is well?" she whispered.

"Snug as a bug in a rug," said the agreeable fellow. "Call me penbwl, and that's blockhead, if he isn't birdsnesting in a fortnight."

She heaved out all her soul in a sigh of ecstasy. The doctor conned her.

"Come, that's some right interest of pink for my money," said he. "We'll be trotting, by your leave. Sorry for my backwardness as a cavalier; but we of the profession can't be choosers. I had to return all roundabout, dropping a call at this and that. Now, if I may give you a lift? They'll be bottling up their congratulations over there against your return."

She answered nothing to that, possessing her own thoughts; but she smiled like a dear angel, and did the prettiest things with her hostess. She was so lovable by nature, it was a wonder that spite could misuse her.

The doctor's little trap waited outside. In a minute they were bowling on their way. She did not speak much, but happily he was garrulous. Her thoughts floated on the current of his chatter, borne along by it but only partly submerged. She had a wistful eye all the time for her own prospects.

The nearer she approached "Bryntyddyn," the faster her heart throbbed and the slower her tongue. She answered sweetly but at random. She was already on the threshold of the final truth. A thousand hopes and apprehensions flickered in her brain, and went out, and were succeeded by others. But always *his* was the paramount figure there. She knelt to it, prayed to it, begged its forgiveness for her rejection of its appeal on the boy's behalf. For his sake! He had said it, and it had broken her heart to refuse—but she had wanted him without fear and without reproach, and her eyes had been blinded. Not wilfully; for pity's sake let him believe it. She implored his pardon—she loved him—she would abase herself and own it. Had her sin quite alienated his growing tenderness, his kinder understanding? If not, why had he never come near her, never signified by word or sign his withdrawal of that unspoken curse which had withered her kneeling stricken at his feet? Perhaps he had spoken the word—deputed some other, in the midst of his distractions, to deliver it.

In the joy, the anguish of the thought, she was on the point of questioning the doctor, subtly, with a view to possible enlightenment, *when she saw him*. The "little crop black nag" just tossed her head, with a start and a jingle of harness—and there he had been and was not. He had backed into the shadow of some roadside trees, hearing the trap approaching, and perhaps distinguishing its occupants, and, in the falling dusk of the evening, he had been visible one moment as they passed. The doctor whipped on, all unguessing, but con-



cerned for the sudden shiver with which his companion drew the rug about her knees.

“Chilly?” he asked. “Come, Peggy, my girl, a spurt for the last lap and we win!”

The gate was reached in another minute, and Mrs. Merrivale alighted, with a world of grateful thanks. No, she would go up to the house alone—she was perfectly recovered and well. But her heart sank a little, as she mounted the drive, and saw the lighted building facing her like a silent hall of judgment.

The flunkey at the door met her with a message. My lady was in the study, and had desired to see Mrs. Merrivale the moment she returned. There was something that struck odd and ominous about the terms of the injunction. They savoured of peremptoriness and rebuke. There appeared even a dignified arrogance about the set of the man's back, as he preceded her to the room in question.

It was a little room, hard by the front door. A portrait of the late viscount hung over its chimney-piece. He was represented as a callow, loose-mouthed young man in shooting dress, with a papery face, bald meaningless eyes, a pinched nose, and spindle calves buttoned into gaiters. He stood at angular ease, in roomy knickerbockers of a pronounced pattern faithfully depicted, with a gun lolling over his right arm, and a clumber spaniel posing at his feet.

His relict, standing in the flesh underneath, showed a countenance almost as pallid as that of the noble unlamented. It was so colourless in

texture, so nervous in suggestion, that her disowned friend, coming in upon it with all her thoughts disordered, was struck aghast over the sudden omen it implied. She stopped with a shiver.

“May!” she whispered—“what is it? O, he is not——!”

The other, rallying on the instant to action, gave a long quivering sigh, and faced her. Her colour came, then, and deepened with every word she spoke.

“Do you mean the child? He is quite comfortable and at ease. I congratulate you on your recovery. It must be complete, since you dare to mention him at all.”

“Dare!”

Mrs. Merrivale, standing where she had stopped, echoed the word in a low voice of amazement. Then *her* colour mounted in a flood. She understood directly. It was to be war, bitter and uncompromising.

“That is quite unwarranted,” she said quietly. For the moment she was the more dangerous of the two. “I owe you no explanation or palliation of my conduct. Such as it has been, you yourself were responsible, and wickedly responsible, for the worst of its errors.”

“Was I?” said Lady Woodroffe with chill hauteur. “Well, I don’t wish to bandy words with you.”

“Nor I with you,” said her friend. “In the art of prostituting them to base meanings I am sure you would prove my superior. I had not the advantages of your education, you see.”

The cut went fairly home, splitting the veneer from top to toe.

“You insolent beast!” cried the *ex-comédienne*. “Get out of my house, do you hear? I’ll not have you a moment longer to pollute it with your presence. O, a fine education that learns her to solicit where her favours aren’t desired or required! Take your baggage and walk.”

She was quite beside herself. She turned and seized a parcel from a bureau, and flung it upon the table.

“There,” she said, panting stormily—“you may take it; it belongs to you. For all my education *I* wouldn’t have so forgotten myself.”

Mrs. Merrivale looked from the furious face to the package, and back again. A cold bewilderment sat on her brow.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said; “but indeed you are not to be accused of forgetting yourself or your origin. I wish I could say you were.”

Lady Woodroffe positively gasped. She stepped back. A sudden fear of this soft stabbing creature tingled throughout her. She felt as if she had been stung by a jelly-fish. She stood for a minute, fighting down her passion—fighting to recover her self-control.

“I was not responsible for my origin, Margaret,” she said presently, low and rather breathless. “I should hardly have thought it the part of good-breeding to throw it in my teeth.”

Her voice trembled a little with the aggrieved note that courts propitiation; but she had passed



the Rubicon and was committed. No doubt she was frightened somewhat, recalling the terms, the very vulgar terms, of her retort. They had been such as no woman could pardon. She neither expected nor desired forgiveness, however; but she did desire to dispose of her friend without further hurt to herself. But, in that, her friend showed no intention of gratifying her.

“I am afraid you cherish a good many delusions about yourself,” she answered, as chill and soft as floating snow-flakes—“but a little knowledge of breeding is a dangerous thing. Will you tell me, please, what is in this parcel?”

Lady Woodroffe stood very white. Her tongue was tingling with venom, but she dared not risk a dart. She struggled to emulate the other's self-composure.

“I am ashamed to have it mentioned,” she said; “but I daresay your refinement will be superior to such prudery. It is something belonging to you—something that had been used to cover the boy with.”

“My flannel petticoat?”

“Mrs. Merrivale! I really wonder at you.”

“He was hurt; he was sopped through; he was perishing with pain and cold.”

“That may be; but, without being a Virginia, I think you might have shown a little more decency of resource in a difficult situation. The boy is a gentleman.”

“*Noblesse oblige*. Are you sure, Lady Woodroffe, that you can quite enter into the feelings of a gentleman?”

But, in the midst of her astonished indignation, that rare sense of humour came to tickle her, and a half-hysterical spasm of laughter shook her bosom. There was something in the sound, in the understanding it implied, which stung the other beyond any verbal insult. She flushed with passion.

"You will please to take it, and leave my house," she cried, stepping forward.

Mrs. Merrivale put a hand to her breast, panting a little.

"I quite comprehend you, Lady Woodroffe," she said. "This is only consistent with the rest of your behaviour, and I might have expected it. My desire to go cannot be less than yours to get rid of me. But I confess I hardly looked for such instant measures—at this time in the evening, unattended, and with all my things in disorder."

"That is untrue. Your trunks were found packed, and have already been sent down to the station. There are still trains to catch, and hotels to be found in Caer Gollwyn. Roberts is waiting ready with the motor. I will send for him."

"Please to wait a minute."

She pressed a hand a moment to her forehead. Some irresistible emotion at the end was overcoming her.

"I don't think you quite realise what you are doing," she said, a certain agitation in her voice—"in driving me to desperation like this."

Lady Woodroffe shrugged her shoulders, exulting in her triumph.

"I think so, I am afraid so," she said. "Hasty

conclusions have always been your bane, my dear. You must be content to reap as you have sown."

"May! we have been friends—for the things we have both said to one another we shall come to be sorry. Won't you forgive?"

"O, this is pitiable, Margaret! Are you a woman to ask it? But of course you are, and the most cunning of your sex. Happily I see through you."

"To go like this—without a word? And I owe them both so much reparation."

"Your debt is best paid by helping them to forget you. I wish you could see it; but I doubt your power, knowing how blind you can be to the real feelings aroused by your importunities. Fortunately, Mr. Herne has put himself beyond their reach, and the pain of having to reject them. He has taken up his quarters here, to help in attending to his little friend. He" (she spoke what she believed), "and the nurse I have procured, are with the patient at this moment. I cannot dream of allowing any of them to be disturbed by what could only prove a useless and distressing scene. You must be content, Margaret, with your merciful deliverance from the consequences of the evil you designed."

Mrs. Merrivale gazed, with shining eyes, at the cruel speaker for a little; then, with a deep sigh, she turned to go.

"I will ring for the motor," said Lady Woodroffe. She moved to touch the bell; but the other stopped her.



"Please, no ; I do not want it."

Lady Woodroffe paused.

"You can't walk."

"I can do more," answered her dismissed friend, "and go farther than you think, when I am driven."

Lady Woodroffe, dropping her hand, made a gesture of repudiation.

"I am not driving you. I won't have you affect that pretence to yourself or others. On the contrary, I am doing all I can to save appearances."

Mrs. Merrivale, standing at the door, faced her for one moment.

"May," she said, "whatever happens, will you always remember this ? I could not hate you because I pitied you so."

With the words she was gone, and Lady Woodroffe heard the front door close softly upon her.

For a minute the victor stood with clenched hands and pale frowning face ; then she stepped forward hurriedly, and entered the hall. She almost ran upon Mr. Perceval Acton, who was standing there hatted, buttoning up his coat. She quite staggered back from the contact.

"A chilly evening," said the barrister. "One, unless a bucolic Herne, must take precautions."

"What do you mean ?" she whispered, staring at him.

"Only," said Acton airily, "that I saw him go out a little while ago, like a jolly mariner with his waistcoat bared to the breeze. *I* can't afford such risks ; but he's two men in one, you see, and can take liberties with himself."

"You saw him ?"

“Certainly. He was off to fetch the parrot, I understood.”

She gulped, and put a hand to her throat.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“In some one’s tracks,” he answered. “You mustn’t delay me, or I may lose them.”

“One minute,” she said. “You have been listening.”

He laughed at her.

“Of course I have—or shutting my ears unsuccessfully. The moment’s ripe, don’t you think?”

He was gone before she could utter another word.

. . . . .  
Acton hurried down the drive towards the road, taking the strip of side-turf to deaden his footsteps. He heard no sound of any one preceding him—questioned the lodge-keeper at the gate, and learned that she had not passed that way. He returned hastily upon his tracks, stealing like a cat. His eyes sparkled and his teeth showed.

“She’s actually going to him—taking the upper way,” he thought. “The devil seize her for a determined jade! If I can only overtake her before they meet! Not under any circumstances, would she? Not even, as that dog’s discarded mistress, to reinstate her credit with the world? We shall see.”

He increased his pace as he passed the house, and entered the wood by the little wicket-gate. He believed that he was about to run his quarry to bay with no great effort; but there he was mistaken. Exhausted as she was by the fatigues and agitations of the day, Mrs. Merrivale had

received such a stimulus to her nerves of motion that, though he scurried his best, he was never able to gain materially on the start she had secured. He began to realise it, as he laboured on, breathless and cursing. She had this advantage over him, that while he was only drawn, she was both pulled and driven. She wanted to give herself no time for thought. A wild emotion was in her heart to get it all over and done with—to dare the final test for utter love or utter loss.

As she sped, in the deep gloaming, down the haunted alley, some change in the atmosphere of the place struck her even in the wild urgency of her mind. Birds were flying and calling over the trees ; the deathly suggestion of things was gone ; the house, as she passed it, seemed, in its opened door and unshuttered windows, to breathe forth a spirit of mournfulness rather than of terror. Still she hurried on and down. She hoped—she dared to hope—that he had been on his way to visit and forgive. What if, realising her destination as they passed, he had abandoned his purpose ?

No ; there was a light in the house—it shone forth, quiet and radiant, through the open door, and glinted on the tumbling stream beneath. Not another sound but the water's broke the stillness. Pausing one moment to fight for breath, she crept down, and crossed the little bridge.

Acton just saw her as she passed in, and he came to a stop on the slope, his lungs pumping furiously. Like a foiled vengeance he stood eyeing the oblong of placid light. Suddenly a man's form appeared framed in it ; and the next instant the



door went softly to, and he heard the sound, little but distinct, of a key turning in its wards. He uttered a low damning curse and then a laugh.

“ Well,” he muttered, “ she’s done us. So much for *her* reputation, when the morning comes ! Fortunate I’m a witness—but poor Lady Woodroffe ! ”

He elected not to return to “ Bryntyddyn ” until late. He wished, now, to ensure to the fullest extent the ruin of the two who had so spited him. For an hour or more he lingered about the spot, in order to substantiate his proofs. Then he returned to the hall at his leisure.

Dinner was just over, and Lady Woodroffe, instead of having gone to the drawing-room, was awaiting his return in the study. She came out when she heard him. Her eyes glowed like living things behind a mask of ivory. The moment they were alone, he pushed her into the room and shut the door. She leapt at him.

“ He has not come back ! What does it mean ? ”

He met her heat with a laugh, quite coolly.

“ Better engaged, that’s all. She’s gone to ask him to make a dishonest woman of her—and, it seems, he’s agreed. I was too late. He was just locking the door upon them both, and I found myself on the wrong side of it, and not wanted. You may throw up, Lady Woodroffe. She’s done us.”

She stood staring at him a moment ; then went moving blindly for the door.

“ Come ! ” she whispered. “ Why don’t you come ? ”

“Where and what for?” he asked.

“To kill her,” she said—and tottered and fell upon his arms as they were flung out to save her. But she still struggled to urge him on, whispering and moaning. He was putting some angry pressure into his resistance, when there came a tap at the door, and a maid entered.

“What do you want, you fool?” he demanded, with a scowl of fury.

The scared little creature shrunk away, answering in a tremble:

“Pleece, my lady, the nurse think you better haf come to the young gentleman. He is very hot, and speak nonsenses.”

Lady Woodroffe, dropping her arms, stood motionless for an instant, and then hurried from the room.

## CHAPTER XXX

HE was sitting alone, with his elbow on the table and his chin propped on his hand. A lighted candle stood before him, and, drowsing and cooing in its glow, the old green parrot. Herne's eyes, devouring nothing material in their trance, were fixed between. His brain seemed to float in a luminous haze, half-troublous, half-ecstatic. A thousand motes of fancy were poising and darting in it. He followed first one, then another, and lost all as he followed each to its extinction.

He had left his little sleeping partner—left him, as he thought, happily content and secure—and had come down on this pretext, which was as genuine as the purpose behind it was shadowy. Yet which was the more really responsible for his presence here?

It mattered nothing, after all, since, in keeping with the general tenor of his fortunes, that purpose, whether it came first or second in the context, was all baffled and wasted. Had he meant to forgive or to beg forgiveness? What use to ask himself now? The opportunity for either was past. To what "lame and impotent conclusions" of things was he eternally destined! Playing, or "resting"—as *the* profession politely put its enforced inactivities—he was a failure.



What then? As one, whose professed business it was to penetrate and analyse the motives of human actions, he had been utterly unsuccessful in convincing the human brotherhood of his fitness for the task. The brotherhood, no doubt, had been right. He was a dreamer, and saw things not as they were, but as he wished them to be. Likely enough his wish had been father to the thought of the motive behind this woman's act. That, of course, he must now assure himself, had been dictated by concern for his honest reputation—not by any warmer feeling. She despised him—had always despised him for those very invertebrate qualities which made him so unfit to judge his fellows. He could never be for her, nor she for him, on such terms of sorry compromise. Were he to take advantage of that brief emotion, it were to rank himself with no better than the common debaucher.

A brighter mote leapt into being, and hung suspended like a crimson star. He “saw red” suddenly. Supposing he *were* to enforce, to assert himself, and convince of the latent masterfulness which all women deprecated and loved—it might be to burst the accumulated toils of misunderstanding at a blow! To cut this Gordian knot of things—he had only to strike and she must fall—why should he endure for ever the spiteful misinterpretations of Fate? Possession—possession of this beautiful thing, already his by right! His flesh throbbed for it—to seize and claim and use it; to chastise if he desired; to pardon and enfold at the last. He had played the gentle philosophic

part too long. It was a part which earned itself no credit and no reward. Rape and Rapine were the accepted orders of success. He would take this woman by her white throat, and afterwards, retempered by his hot triumph, the silly world by assault.

In the passion of his mood he arose, and went tramping to and fro. His eyes sparkled; his breath came short; if intense desire could bring possession, she must answer to the lure and come.

A quick footstep sounded on the bridge, and she stood before him.

For a moment he remained transfixed—for a moment believed her to be the very materialised spirit of his mad conjurations. Her face was white and wild; her eyes entreated him; she breathed, pressing a hand to her bosom, like one near spent. At length he stirred and spoke.

“Margaret!” he whispered—and she answered “Harry!” and tottered towards him.

He caught her in his arms—she seemed about to fall—and held her fast a moment. She struggled to be released, and he released her. What were the first words found meet to so tremendous an occasion? Commonplace enough.

“I wanted to know,” she panted, with lowered head, “who sent you here?”

A chill like death’s smote upon his heart.

“Raxworthy,” he answered.

“Did he tell you why?”

“No. I was looking for a quiet place in which to bury myself and my disillusionments. Robin and I had just met by accident, and agreed to run

away together ; and I went to the old man for advice, and he suggested *Caer Gollwyn*."

" I understand."

" You mean he knew that *you* were here ? "

" I had seen him in London, and told him of my plans. We have always corresponded—he has always kept me informed of—of things."

" Yes, to be sure. What a leery old fellow ! What a cunning advocate ! My dear, I am sorry I encumber the earth so long."

" Harry ! "

She looked up with that little agonised cry. He went very softly, closed and locked the door, and came back to her. She had not moved.

" *Things*," he said, " have only altered, so far as I am concerned, I fear, for the worse. I have grown no more strenuous ; no more admirable. Our misfortune is that I am a living failure instead of a dead one."

" O ! " she said, clasping her hands to him, while the tears fell from her eyes, " why will you read me so ? I have wronged you, Harry—always wronged you from the first. I did not think you would go ; and when you insisted and went, I knew that I had been mistaken, both in myself and in you."

He was looking at her very earnestly. One could have heard the beating of his heart.

" That is a riddle," he said. " How am I to interpret it ? "

" By my shame," she answered. " Will you force me to tell it ? "

He took a single step towards her.

" Yes," he said. " I am in a cruel mood."



She stood at his mercy, a flushed sweet figure, with bowed head and drooping hands.

“It was in realising the truth,” she said. “They used to call you a Quixote, Harry; and I understood why at last. You went to fight windmills, with the name of a worthless misunderstanding creature on your lips. But she came to understand—to admire your courage—even to try to identify herself with the cause you upheld so nobly. She wrote some little things, and glowed to hear them called John Wisdom’s children.”

She stopped. “Go on,” he said, in a tense eager voice; “why do you hesitate?”

“I want to linger out my little term of happiness,” she sighed, “before I hear my sentence. O, Harry!—my guilt in thought and deed!”

She looked up one instant, with swimming eyes; and so down again, trembling.

“My child,” he said softly; “I am not a harsh man. I am guilty too—of being just myself. What can each of us say more? Only, I think, an indeterminate nature is less to be excused than a passionate one. Confess, and get it done. Shall I help you? We have earned the right, at last and at least, to be frank with one another. You believed that the boy’s claim upon me was a closer one than appeared?”

A long quivering sigh broke from her; but she answered nothing.

“It was a wrong belief,” he said sadly. “I have never wavered, in my faith before or my duty since. I should have thought you knew me better.”

She fell on her knees before him, and caught his hands in hers, and hid her face from him.

“O, I did, I did!” she cried in agony. “But it seemed so to account for your attitude—to supply a reason for your going. And such an explanation of it all had never occurred to me—never once before. And, when at last it did—O, I had prided myself so on your strength and honour—on the fame you had made for yourself—so like a noble Bayard, Harry—and all my belief in you seemed shaken to its foundations.”

She crouched lower, still clinging to him—her lips, her wet lashes brushed his fingers.

“I never meant to harm him,” she wept. “I met the man by accident, and he spoke to me. He said the child had run away, and I thought—perhaps—O, remember your own character, Harry!—I thought you might have burdened yourself with a charge of which you would be glad in your heart to be relieved. But even then I did not understand—I did not do you justice—and they saw to it—Lady Woodroffe and Mr. Acton did—that I should not be allowed to. They talked of a likeness between you and the boy; they treated the thing as a joke; and, when they found they could not make me believe, they hinted bad things of our meetings—of my visits to you.”

She tightened her arms, pressing her hot cheek against his knees. His face, looking down on her, was very white and grim of a sudden.

“Forgive me, Harry!” she said—“if you will only forgive me! I am punished so dreadfully—in my sin, and the knowledge of what I have for-

feited through it. I ask you nothing now, but to put me right with the world. If you will—if you will only do that—I will go away and never trouble you again.”

“Is that all your shame?” he asked, still unmoving.

She lifted a tear-stained face to him.

“Is it not enough? Do you know why I am here, like this? She turned me out of her house an hour ago. She said she would not have me there to pollute it any longer. I came to you because I was homeless, Harry.”

“Maggie!”

The cry rang from him like a cry of victory. He bent, and took her face between his hands in a hard exultation. He glared into it, commanded it, mercilessly.

“Is that all your shame, I ask again?” he said.

She whispered, after a moment, “No.”

“What else?”

“Must I answer?”

“You must answer.”

“Harry, I cannot.”

He knelt before her, wrapt his arms about, approached his face to hers.

“Is it this?” he said.

Her eyes closed; her head fell back; a smile of ineffable happiness broke upon her lips. He bent his own to them—and drew away an instant.

“This is not atonement?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Nor pity?”

Again the shake.



“What is it, then ? ”

She threw her arms about his neck, and, this time, herself taking the initiative, answered him without a word.

Presently he spoke again, very softly now.

“Both exiles until this moment. Is it not so, dear ? You have come home, have you not ? ”

And she answered, “I have come home, Harry, my husband.”

## CHAPTER XXXI

HECTOR LEVESON, as the guest of one woman and the confidant, *amicus usque ad aras*, of another her rival, was finding himself in a difficult position. Fate had certainly put thorns in the poor man's bed of ease. He had come for a holiday, and had been worked, both as to his physical and moral sensibilities, worse than a popular parson in a swapped cure. No wonder that he sighed a welcome to that apparent amelioration of circumstances which seemed to promise him an early escape to the comparative repose of Fleet Street. His work was falling into arrears; it had been fairly impossible to concentrate, upon labours subject to such frequent dramatic interruptions, the sober brow of reflection; he hailed with gratitude the happy termination to a threatened tragedy.

Now his increased understanding of the trend of affairs had served to confirm rather than to weaken his warm sympathies with the motherly young creature, whose beauty and gentle qualities had attracted him from the first; but, at the same time, he owed a certain regard and a certain duty to the other. The more deadly point at issue between them being resolved, there remained only the question of amorous competition, and in that,

he felt, he could neither share nor interfere. He would just wait to ascertain the fair disposal of the lists, and then on the morrow he must withdraw himself finally and definitely.

Alack, poor man ! he guessed not what the night was to bring forth. Assured as to the promising condition of the little patient, confident in the atmosphere of chastened peace which appeared to have fallen upon the household, he withdrew to his room, and spent the remainder of the day in an attempt to overtake his engagements. He did not appear again until dinner-time ; and then he found, a little to his surprise and discomfort, that he was to constitute his hostess's sole company. He ventured to refer to the fact, after an interval, with some humorous self-deprecation. She answered him very cold and stately. She welcomed the chance, she said. It was not often that either he or circumstance was inclined to favour her so. Her face was chill-white, as she spoke ; her eyes met his as hard as agates. He did not like their look at all.

Presently he questioned her—was the boy still doing well ? He was in a heavy sleep, she said—the best that could happen. Perhaps Mrs. Merrivale was with him ? She fixed him with her stare again. Nobody but the nurse was with him. Nobody ? Not even Herne ? Mr. Herne, she answered, had gone to fetch the parrot. He insisted, a little grave and peremptory—Had not Mrs. Merrivale returned ? She had come, and gone again, she said quite steadily. Gone ! he exclaimed—where to ? Her hand, white and



jewelled, lying on the table, crumbled a piece of bread into dust. That was her affair, she answered. Perhaps he knew or could guess. He was more in Mrs. Merrivale's confidence than she was.

He had to desist. It was evident there was yet some complication here beyond his ken, or purposed enlightenment. Once or twice he thought he perceived the signs of some rising emotion in her which she had to put force upon herself to subdue. But if it were so, the will in her was always strong to prevail. She left him, when she left him, in a mood of sad discomfort and foreboding.

By-and-by he went up to the drawing-room, and found it empty. He lingered there some time, endeavouring to read, endeavouring to distract his thoughts from the insistence of the shadows which haunted and depressed him. In his abnormal sub-sensitiveness, he seemed to be conscious of unwonted sounds and footsteps about the house, of febrile whisperings and muttered cries. Unable to endure the strain, he rose after a while, and made for his room, which was in a remoter part of the building. With his opening of the drawing-room door, all seemed to fall silent. He listened intently a moment ; then moved on. He passed the billiard-room on his way, and caught a glimpse of Acton, with a long cigar in his mouth, softly manipulating the balls on the table. For an instant he was moved to go in and question him, but he found the thought of assuming the fellow's right to discuss the intimacies of the situation unpalatable, and he went by and shut himself into his own room. There

he was able, after a time, to find absorption in his work.

An hour or two went by, and it was near midnight when he heard a sudden rustle in the passage, and a low tap sounded on his door. He turned in his chair to answer, and instantly Lady Woodroffe came hurriedly in, and closed the door behind her. She was still in evening dress. Her face was wild with grief and despair. There was a diamond in her bosom, and she clutched a hand to it, as if there were the unquenchable fire which was eating into her heart. He rose, in deep astonishment and pity.

"What—" he was beginning; but she interrupted him.

"He is very ill—he is dying."

She panted so that she could hardly articulate. He held out his hands in profound sympathy. She ran at, and caught them in her own.

"You are strong—you are a good man," she said hoarsely. "I have no one else to go to—no one in the world. O, forgive me—listen to me!"

"Hush!" he said. "I have got hold of you. Do you feel this? Now, tell me."

"He is dying," she repeated. "He awoke in a terrible fever—the awful strain and injury to such a little life. It was a false confidence. The doctor is with him—he says that unless this soon abates he must die."

He put her hands together, and stroked them very softly.

"God help us all," said he. "Will you blame Him for taking a little child?"

“No,” she whispered, with a single irrepressible sob. “I wish He had been as merciful to me.”

But her mood changed on the word. “Blame!” she cried brokenly—“it is the living who are to blame. You cannot save him, nor I; but you can judge of the sin and its deserts, and you can tell me what I am to do.”

He caught some fatal import in her words, and spoke in quick alarm.

“He is not here? Why is he not? He must be fetched, of course, and at once.”

She wrenched her hands away, and stood facing him.

“Will you fetch him?” she said.

“If need be,” he answered.

“You will find him at his house,” she said, “and his paramour with him.”

He read the passion in her eyes, and muttered “Good God!” under his breath.

“You asked me,” she said, “if she had returned; and I answered that she had come and gone again. She had. She went straight to him. I tell you what I know. They are together now.”

He gave a profound sigh, and pressed his hands to his forehead.

“Nevertheless,” he said, in deep anguish, “he must be fetched.”

She moved and seized his arm in a fierce grip.

“Him—not her!” she said madly. “Do you understand?”

He answered with a motion of his head.

“She shall not have all,” she cried. “Let her keep what she has got—it will need some care—



these fancies of the wise for fools are soon exhausted. Tell her to hold fast while she may—tell her——”

She caught at him, as if that storm of emotion had suddenly swept herself from her balance ; she bowed her face over his arm.

“ O, give me this little life,” she cried passionately, as if indeed he stood for the immortal word—“ give it me, give it me ! I have nothing else in all the world to call my own.”

She broke away from him on the instant, and stood with wild wet eyes and disordered hair.

“ Hush ! ” she said. “ Is that his voice ! I must go back to him. If he is to die—it shall be here—here on me—I will kill any one who tries to part us.”

She hurried to the door—paused with her fingers on the handle—looked round a moment.

“ One thing,” she said—“ will you get rid of Mr. Acton for me ? He must go at once. If he refuses, he shall be turned out.”

“ I will see him now,” he said, “ before——”

He did not finish the sentence ; with one last wild look at him she was gone.

Very grim, he followed her out. Acton’s room was hard by. He found the door ajar, tapped and went in. The barrister, in his pyjamas, was in the act of making hurriedly for his bed, by which a candle burned. Leveson observed that the bed had already been lain in. The detected turned a pallid rather sneaking face to him.

“ Hullo ! ” he said, endeavouring to play surprise.

“ Look here,” said Leveson, “ you’d better pack, hadn’t you ? You’ve got to be off the first thing in the morning, you know.”

“ O, have I ? ”

“ Don’t you know you have ? ”

“ Upon my word, you’re pretty cool, Mr. Leveson.”

He sat himself down on the bed edge, put his arms akimbo, and tried to brazen it out.

“ The better for you,” said the critic. “ You’ve got an eye to your best interests, I’m sure. You’ll not serve those by flying in the face of the public press.”

“ Hullo ! ” said the barrister. “ Doesn’t that smack of blackmail and carcelage, Mr. Ink-slinger ? ”

“ Very well, I withdraw it,”

“ O ! I’ll go. There’s nothing of any further interest here to keep me.”

“ Nothing whatever. You’ve done all the spite you can. Only remember, if any distorted version of this business comes my way, I shall know to whom to trace it.”

He went out without another word, fetched his hat, and made his way, stout soul, into the open. Dawn was already promising. He set his face, with no more than a single groan, to the task before him.

That first ghost of the coming light found the lovers still wrapped in one another’s arms. There had been long confidences to exchange, long explanations to whisper, long arrears of misunderstanding to make up, and reveal, for their result, the sum of utter human happiness. These emotions must of their nature remain sacred. The two were absorbed, for the moment, each in the other ;

forgetful of all else in that bliss of reconciliation and sweet assured security.

To them came Hector Leveson with his destructive mission. He was weary stumping by the roads ; but he felt no pain in his crippled limb to compare with that which tightened round his heart with every step he took. He was not one to judge any sin harshly—least of all the sin of over-lovingness. But he foresaw that the message he had to give, cruel if justly retributive on the betrayer, must recoil with stunning force upon the head of her who had given herself to be his pretext for neglect. True, he, Leveson, had not been informed of all—guessed that he had not been ; yet enough of dereliction was confessed to force on him the thought, “Even a little more provocation, and it was not justified.” He had believed them both incapable of such a thing—and at such a time ! His heart was very hot against the man ; very pitiful to the poor erring soul whom it was his bitter task to wound.

The lightening of the shadows in the room stirred the lovers from their trance.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered ; “I must go. Supposing he is awake by now, and misses me. Kiss me good-bye. You must stay here for the moment. I have a duty before me, very stern and very difficult. Hush ! what is that ? ”

There was the sound of a footstep outside. He rose, and she with him. Fearless in her new-found covenant, she came and stood beside him as he opened the door—and there, leaning on the bridge, was Hector Leveson.



A moment's silence followed ; then, with a smile, half-shamefaced, half-humorous, the man took the woman's hand in his, and drew her forward.

"Mr. Leveson," he said, "I owe you, as I owe all the world of honest speaking, a plain apology. I have posed too long in pseudonyms. There was a reason, but it is past. My name is Henry Owen Merrivale, and this is my wife. We were married ten years ago."

## CHAPTER XXXII

INTO the parlour of the little stone house beyond Tal-y-sarn, in which Mr. Owen Merrivale had established his wife during the period of the child's illness, limped Hector Leveson one day. He had not come to visit the sad beautiful lady, but, by appointment, the lady's and her husband's legal adviser, Mr. Raxworthy of Lincoln's Inn, who had journeyed all the way from London to deliver himself of certain reflections on an insane piece of business.

The just critic, the genial mind, was now in the crisis, so to speak, of his suspense. He was hung up in a web of embarrassments, like a great bewildered bumble-bee, secure in his strength, but for the moment unable to extricate himself from the glutinous snare. His own affairs, on the one side, were calling to him with an insistent clamour ; on the other, the interests to which he had bound himself were holding him frantically from escape. He halted, like Garrick, between twin seductions, favouring either, but unable to make up his mind while that lay at the mercy of his heart. Acting advocate for both these tragic women, he could not find it in his soul to abandon the cause of their mutual reconciliation. He was pledged to himself to see the business through before he left.

He was shown straight in to Mr. Raxworthy. It was like a meeting between sword and buckler, the one keen, cold, and steely, the other round, jolly, and reverberant. The lawyer presented a figure of exact precision and formality ; the writer one of abounding unconventionality. Each took the other's measure, and closed, with punctilio.

"Be seated, sir, be seated," said Raxworthy. "I am glad to meet you. You come, I am to understand, with a proposition from the lady you represent ? "

"I represent, sir," said Leveson, "nothing but the general cause of good-will."

"In this comedy of fools ? "

"In this comedy of tragic errors."

"H'm ! " said the lawyer. "We won't dispute the title. The play's the thing—hey ? But all good-will is founded on compromises. What is yours ? "

"That Lady Woodroffe should be allowed to adopt the boy."

The lawyer, pondering the proposition, rubbed his chin grittily.

"Mr. Leveson," he said presently, "you are an author, I believe. I haven't much reason, or inclination, to respect the craft as a rule—engrossers of bad deeds, sir—cranks and mischief-makers. But I own that this suggestion of yours strikes me as timely."

Leveson laughed.

"Let us discuss it, then. My one desire is to find a way out of a very painful *impasse*. I like lawyers, you must know, Mr. Raxworthy, as little



as you like authors. They are the fellows who reduce all life to a formula. The point of meeting here is not literature and jurisdiction, but a common wish, I believe, to help some afflicted souls to happiness."

The other conned the speaker acridly a little ; then broke into a frosty smile.

"Well, Mr. Leveson," he said, "we can join issue, I think, on that."

"Then," answered the critic, "we save a multitude of cross-purposes. Understand that I am as fervently well-disposed towards your clients as I am towards the other party in the suit—to give it the name you would approve."

"I believe you are," said the lawyer. "Well, what does Mr. Merrivale say ? "

"There," replied Leveson, "you touch the crux of the matter. He will not hear of it."

Raxworthy jerked himself back in his chair, with a sharp indrawn hiss.

"Of course," he said. "Perversity is the fool's trade mark. Of course. Here is a way of excellent compromise offered to him, in a situation of great niceness and difficulty, and he rejects it, of course. When he has brats of his own coming in, he will begin to regret his folly, *I dare swear*."

"The question, I do believe, is not so much one of a surrender of his trust, as of the person of the substitute."

"He won't forgive her ? "

"He will not forgive her."

"No, I suppose he will not. Being a crank and a romantic, I suppose he will not. Well ? "

“But he may listen to his wife.”

“May he? Perhaps, if he hasn’t imbued her with his own pigheadedness.”

“I think we ought to make the appeal. She might pardon with grace, where he could not without apparent disloyalty.”

“She might be trusted to take the perspicacious view, at least. Women, where it is their interest to, can see very clearly beyond their own emotions. I dare say this sort of adopted stepson, with his perpetual reminders of a time she would rather forget, would be far from figuring gratefully in her mind’s eye.”

“Supposing we were to make the attempt, then. How about the man Headstone?”

The lawyer crossed his legs, with a sharp jerk and snort.

“About whom else, sir, have I, acting for this insane client of mine, been idiotically exerting myself for a week past? Had it been all to no purpose, I should hardly have welcomed your suggestion as timely. But the matter’s settled, for that side of it. There was a show of resistance; a threat of proceedings—pooh! it was just to save appearances. The man, as a fact, is in the last fear of exposure; he is glad to be rid of his encumbrance on any terms—best of all on such terms as relieve him for once and for ever of the whole of his obligations. He makes the sole condition that if the boy goes he goes for good. He washes his hands of him, and very sensibly. His gain’s clear. I wish I could say as much for Merrivale’s.”

“I think you may, Mr. Raxworthy. Even when

it meant to him a certain crippling of his resources, I fancy you would have found him quite satisfied with his gain."

"Ah!" said the lawyer drily. "We use the term differently. I spoke of it in its prose significance. I am no judge of the other, the romantic sort. But I'm just wondering how far it is calculated to survive the pinch of economies—such, for instance, as the docking of one's nightly pipe and glass of grog. There are more heroes of necessity than necessitous heroes. Short commons make long faces. But anyhow that's an idle speculation. The Comedy's over, and the fanatico has come into his own—after ten years of lunacy, Lord, Lord! He must mark, of course, his partial return to reason by an act as mad as any. What business had he to go detaining and bullying that agent creature?—What was his name?—Paileret. The man was acting perfectly within his rights. But there he was all over—there you have him, a crazy Quixote to the end, dealing out blows at puppet-shows."

He bent his ragged brows on his visitor. Leveson easily read real kindness and warmth of heart under that cynical exterior.

"I confess to a weakness for Quixotes," he said—"if only for the sake of the father of them all."

The lawyer snapped out a laugh.

"This one, I think," said he, "ought to brim the measure of your approval. I wonder if you know, or have guessed, anything of his story?"

"Only as it touches upon his public career."

"And that was perfectly consistent, by what I'm told. Well, it can be abusing no confidences to



inform *you*, who share all peoples', it seems. Indeed, you might hold the record of follies both as justified in itself and justifying everything else. Would you care to hear ? ”

“ If you please.”

“ I think I do. Here it is—a romance, or a lunatic register, just according to the point of view :

“ There were once two friends. One made a fortune, and the other lost a fortune ; and still they remained inseparables, which was at least a thing to be noted by misanthropy. The first was Mrs. Merrivale's father ; the second her husband's. Each had an only child, and the two children were pledged to one another by their parents from the cradle—a most ludicrous and improper arrangement ; but I purpose no comments. Circumstances separated the friends, and the children grew up more or less apart ; but the bond was not forgotten. The boy's father and the girl's—both widowers—died within a few months of one another ; and then came the complications. They were deliberately invited by the terms of the latter's will—as hopeless and unpractical a document as ever attracted the dogs of probate. Briefly, it decreed as follows. If Margaret married Henry, the testator's whole fortune was to become hers ; if she refused to marry Henry, the whole fortune was to become Henry's. What a situation for a proud and sensitive girl ! She refused, of course. She would have refused in any case, but, as it happened, she had already engaged herself to another person. This was a strenuous evangelical, devoted to

philanthropic works. She admired strenuosity above all things ; she did not admire Mr. Henry. She would sacrifice the fortune, and marry strenuosity. But, here, strenuosity had a word to say. To cut a long story short, when he discovered that she would be penniless if she married him, and, indeed, if she did *not* marry some one else—Mr. Henry Owen Merrivale to wit—he, not to mince matters, jilted her, and invested his heart and his altruism in a more profitable security. Very well. Now comes Mr. Henry, and enlarges upon the injustice she is doing *his* sensitiveness by making him rich at her expense. He is privately, it appears—to avoid a purely abstract term—enamoured of her ; but that, being a Quixote, he does not confess. His proposal is that they shall marry formally, and thereafter live apart—a most immoral evasion of the conditions ; which, however, since the matter is since compromised, we will not dwell upon. The essential thing is this : Miss Margaret, wounded in her holiest feelings ; struck by the magnanimity of the offer ; re-adjusting, perhaps, her views as to moral invertebracy, and finding virtues in unexpected places, agrees after a struggle. No doubt she is cossetting in herself a fine little romance of unexpected attachment ; of a determination easily to be won from itself by after small concessions on her part. But, greatly to her astonishment, she finds herself mistaken. They marry, and Henry, adhering to the strict letter of the bond, leaves her forthwith. There exists to him a small patrimony of his own, on which, with the supplementary aid of his pen, and under a fictitious name, he is deter-

mined to exist. Is it possible to conceive folly more profound ? ”

“ O ! I think so.”

“ You do ? Well, observe the sequel. Convinced, now, that he has never really cared about her, that she has merely been the object, the victim, of his contemptuous pity, what change takes place in the lady’s feelings. A change to hatred, of course ? O, not at all ! She covets, if you please, the possession of what she has despised, and now believes herself to be despised by ; she is ready to throw herself at his feet and beg for his forgiveness ; he becomes the siderite of all her stariest heavens. She follows his career at a distance, taking secret rapture from the very qualities which have formerly repelled her. He is a Quixote—hail the breed ! He is a dreamer—bless all mystic vapourers ! These two fools—mark !—love one another ; and they have agreed to meet as strangers in case circumstance should ever bring them together. Pride and folly are to tie their tongues for ever and ever Amen.

“ Well, God save us ! There is an old crass rogue of an attorney, who knows, after all, something of human nature. He has poked under the veneer of things, and now and then found wood there better than its own overlay. These fools were used to communicate with him at intervals—each with the cunning purpose to inform him or herself of the movements of the other. He waited his opportunity, and, though it was long a-coming, it arrived at last.”

“ You were the cause of their meeting ? ”



“Before Heaven and my conscience I was, sir. They have lost ten years of philandering by their folly ; but all’s well that ends well, I suppose.”

“If, indeed, it can be made to,” said Leveson.

He rose, and the lawyer with him.

“Ah !” said the latter. “That’s not the least blamable effect of other peoples’ misunderstandings. Well, we will find and sound her as to the boy.”

They found and opened upon her together.

She was as candid as snow, as soft as down, as impenetrable as marble.

She was her husband’s meek and obedient wife, she said. What he wished, she wished. She must be guided by him in everything.

They could easier have pushed the Venus of Milo from her pedestal. And all the time she bewitched them with loving little caresses and fond melodious words.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

OUT of its deep fear and darkness the little soul had come struggling up to the light. There had been a time when it had seemed impossible that enough buoyancy remained in the wasted life to return it ever again to the surface of things. That was when the crushing pain had settled round its lungs, compressing them like the torture of the boot, and quite overcrowding that other anguish of the broken limb. A heavy toll of suffering for one so young ; but the vitality of youth is amazing. Look how pitifully hard a new-born puppy drowns ! and you would have thought a squeeze enough to extinguish the spark in him. Inch by inch Robin freed himself from the deadly clutches of that old Kraken down in the deeps, and came wavering up to the surface.

He had had a terrible time down there—seeing things—feeling things unseen—dreading unspeakable shadows—bound in chains so tight that they almost burst his heart. Yet, though bound, he was eternally wandering in intricate and fearful places—wandering for ever in search of something which was for ever unattainable and unexplainable. Standing above, they could trace his course by the bubbling chatter which rose incessantly from his submerged lips. They spoke of horrors

which the watchers could neither gauge nor assuage. Their hearts wept to stand there and be so helpless. Of all hard things to listen to, the worst is that shuddering moan of a loved spirit behind the veil which no force of agonised sympathy can rend.

There was one phantom, or group of phantoms, which seemed to haunt and trouble him persistently. He was always coming upon it, at the forking of interminable streets, under dropping eaves of darkness, in the heart of gloomy labyrinths. It distressed and puzzled him immeasurably. Something was going to happen; but what? There was immense expectancy, immense agitation, and that was all. It was expressed in the staring of thronged eyes—tiers upon tiers of them, and all focussed upon a blank and empty arena. When *it* stepped into that space, or grew out of it, the riddle would be solved; but the thing would not come. He cried and moaned for it; it would bring him rest in this horrible weariness; he could sleep then—but it would not come. They were keeping it away from him; they were cruel pretending to misunderstand his frantic longing; they were all leagued together to torture and deny him. Herne, worn and broken, told his wife one day of this shadowy terror. To his surprise, she fastened on him, with frenzied looks.

“Keep it away—shut the door on it! Don’t you understand? It is the unfinished picture—the picture wanting a single figure—if it comes, it is Death!”

He heard her amazed. That night, when the horror returned, he bent and whispered in the



child's ear, "It is all right, Robin. I have read the woman's eyes, and it was Sleep that they saw. He has come, and you can rest."

Loved foster-child of romance! He closed his eyes, and slept on the word. That was the very poetry of faith-healing.

From that moment he began to mend, and Herne and Lady Woodroffe to look at one another.

They had nursed the little patient between them, devotedly, untiringly, every touch a common sympathy—and all the time their eyes had never met but by accident. Now their looks returned to close on an issue left long in abeyance; and there was desperation on the one side, and unforgiveness on the other.

Still, neither spoke; and the days went on, and the boy grew convalescent. He was very sweet and grateful to both; but to the woman he seemed to cling.

One day, during Herne's absence, he put his arm about her neck, and whispered to her:

"What is going to be done with me?"

She bowed her head, and he knew that she was crying.

"At the worst, nothing but good," she answered low. "You are ours for all time, dearest—never to suffer again. Whatever happens, you will not forget me, will you?"

"Forget you!" his throat swelled. "I thought, perhaps—I had hoped—O, I wish you would let me be your child. I know very well that dear Herne and I can never be the same to one another again."

She could not bear her anguish, and she rose and left him. As she crossed the landing, she heard the man's step moving in the hall below, and she ran down, and, with quivering lips and swollen lids, went up and faced him. He was just returned from an interview with Leveson and Mr. Raxworthy, and his face darkened as he saw what awaited him for its sequel.

"I must speak to you," she said. "Will you come in here—into the study?"

He bowed gravely and followed her into the room, closing the door behind him. She held out piteous hands.

"Give him to me! Have I not earned the right? You will not want him now."

His lips were set as grim as Fate; he shook his head stubbornly.

"O!" she cried—"selfish and inhuman! With all your happiness, not to spare me this little!"

"Have you proved yourself a worthy ward to innocence?" he said sternly. "We are your debtors, but you ask too much."

Still she persisted.

"I will adopt him; I will bring him up as my own son; he shall inherit all I have got. Can you promise as much? There must come a time when he will be supplanted in your heart, and you will think with remorse of the wretched unfulfilled life whose little solace you refused in your hour of triumph."

"You wrong me," he answered quietly. "I am guilty of no sentiment so base and cruel. It is this, and this only—that, if you have deserved, you have not atoned. Tell me if, by word or deed,

you have once sought to remedy the evil you designed against a pure and sinless woman. For you, she might be living an outcast at this moment. For your goodness to the child I thank you from my soul; for that unrepented wrong to her you must be content to be judged as you have wrought—hardly as one to whom I should feel justified in entrusting the care of one dear to me.”

Every word was a stab to her. Quite broken and forlorn, she whispered, weeping before him :

“She won where I had lost. Is there no heart of understanding in you ? ”

“No,” he answered, “not as you would have it. I am a man, and I strike fair. The boy must stay with us.”

He paused a moment, waiting her will to speak; then, finding she did not answer, went softly from the room.

It is an idea with some that women, in unwonted tribulation, and seeking a sympathiser, will make, in preference, for the other sex. I don't believe a word of it. A woman in the last resort of desperation will always fly to another woman. She may not get much help or encouragement there, but she will get understanding, and that is the one thing a male is morally incapable of giving her. He may soothe and comfort, or he may rebuke and chastise—in either case he will not comprehend.

That same afternoon Margaret Merrivale was seated sewing and dreaming in her little parlour, when a tragic creature came swiftly in upon her, and sank kneeling at her feet.



“Margaret, forgive me ! ”

She put away her needle in great agitation, and made as if to rise ; but the other prevented her.

“ I had prayed so that my life was to be fulfilled at last, and my hope is still-born. Through you, you cruel woman. O, how can you grudge me, out of all your promise and possession, so small a gift ! ”

“ He has refused you, May ? ”

There was the intuition, be it seen, smart as tap on drum.

“ No, you have, Margaret. How could I know what I did ? Don't you deserve that I should hate you ? And look at me.”

“ May, dearest, don't cry so ! ”

“ I could cry myself to death. I don't fear it ; I have been face to face with it so long. And all for nothing—and you will be my murderess.”

“ O ! O ! you wicked thing ! You don't know how resolved he can be. To have lived a pauper all these years, and with such riches at his command ! We shall see now how the world will bow to him.”

“ I am sure we shall. I was always one of his chief admirers from the first. I think he is the greatest of living authors.”

“ Isn't he ? You can be such an angel when you like, May. I think the blame was mine ; but you don't know how cruelly I was situated.”

“ I know now. But you have got your reward for all the years of pain. Everything is yours in the end, Margaret ; and only mine the despair and the punishment.”

“ No, no ! You have nursed the boy so de-

votedly ; he must have learned to love you as his own mother."

"Margaret ! I didn't think it of you. And with the blissful consciousness you must have, and you only, of being able to move that strong will to any concession for your sake ! "

"Hush, May ! It seems so cruel a boast when he is mine. But certainly, I think, Robin ought to be allowed a voice in the matter. We are forgetting that."

"You would not want another, and a stranger, to share his love ? "

"Hush, I say ! You must come with me at once. Pull down your veil, while I keep you just a moment."

A quarter of an hour later there came a tap on the door of the sick-room, and the two women, like tremulous guilty petitioners, stole in hand in hand and stood with flushed self-conscious faces. Robin, sitting propped up on pillows, uttered a little pipe of joy and fell breathless. He saw Herne rise on the instant, and stand with a curious expression on his face between protest and emotion ; and he saw Mrs. Merrivale's eyes take a sudden light of rapture into their blue, as if the sun had smitten them.

"Robin ! " she said softly. "It is so sweet to see you safe and well again, and to know to whom it is all due. I could not have done like that ; but I hope you have not quite forgotten your old nurse in your new one."

They had not set eyes on one another since the date of that vigil in the haunted house. To her it had been the hardest trial of all that, when Hector

Leveson had come down upon them that glowing morning with his staggering message of death, she might not follow her lord into the lists where the shadow was awaiting him to close with—might not claim her right to share in the watching—might never dream of setting foot in the house which had so insulted and rejected her. She had suffered terribly afterwards while the balance wavered; and when it had sunk at last to the golden scale of sleep, her joy and gratitude had been proportionate. Now, like an angel of forgiveness, she had come to touch, if she might, the last wound of all with healing.

The boy smiled back on her, quivering out a great sigh of happiness. This end was what he had longed for in his little understanding soul. He had lain placid, seemingly incurious, all during the time of his convalescence; accepting the restful marvel of things; peacefully ruminating, without comment, the wonders which Herne had told him. That this dear comrade of his and Mrs. Merrivale were long man and wife was the chief of them. He had dwelt upon the revelation after his queer thoughtful fashion, fitting it silently into observations of his own. Things which they never suspected were moving in the deep mind of him all the time that he lay so quiet. He saw that she who had first saved him never came to take part in his nursing; he saw that, behind the tenderest ministrations of the two who vied with one another in devotion to that task, lurked always the shadow of some mutual grievance. Now, Heaven knows what precocious intuition informed this youngster's



mind ; but somehow he knew that offended love was at the bottom of all this mystery, and that it but awaited his cure to resent its injuries in bitter form, of which his removal from “Bryntyddyn” would be the first expression. That fancy troubled him greatly in its necessary association with another. Herne was married ; Herne loved his wife so much that no devotion on the part of another to himself, Robin, his friend and favourite, could palliate that offence to his love of which she had been guilty. *He* came no longer first in Herne’s view ; when his retributive uses were over and done with, he might even find himself an embarrassment, in the way. What a dear solution of all these difficulties if *she* would forget and forgive, and leave him, in pledge of that reconciliation, to the care of one whom he had learned to love and to cling to, and who had said with her own lips how much she wanted him. And here at the last she had come, and he read the realisation of his hopes in her wet shining eyes.

He smiled to her ; and held out his arms to both.

“O !” he said—“to see you two together ! I have so wanted it.”

She would have drawn the other forward ; but she would not. Her woeful eyes were fixed upon the man. Suddenly Margaret broke from her, and, running to her husband, wreathed her arms about his neck.

“She is sorry, Harry,” she whispered—“she is a lonely woman. We have so much, and she so little. For my sake, Harry, in the end.”

Still he hesitated. She released him, with a quick little laugh and cry.

“O, what are we doing! It is not for us to decide who shall be his mother. The sage who knows him best can judge him best. Come, May!”

All in a flutter of tears and merriment she caught at her friend again, and drew her to the bed-foot. There on the rail sat the parrot, sardonic—contemplative.

“Put out your hand to him,” said Margaret, “and I will do the same.”

Two white hands were proffered tremblingly to the sage. He considered both awhile, suddenly feigned a little peck at the rounder (whereat its owner squeaked and drew away), and, turning, waddled solemnly up the titled lady’s arm, and, sitting on her shoulder, plumped for aristocracy.

Margaret clapped her hands, Herne smiled, the boy laughed tremulously. The situation was resolved by a happy inspiration, and the decision was taken out of proud and stubborn mortal hands. As if by one impulse, the two women ran and sat themselves, one on either side the boy’s pillow, and he put an arm about the waist of each.

“I love you all,” he said; “but Ferdinand has chosen, hasn’t he?”

Herne—as we will call him to the end—came forward, with moist eyes.

“So, little fellow-wayfarer,” he said, “our ways are to divide at last?”

“O, no!” answered little Robin, “I think they have all met for the first time.”

. . . . .

This is the story of a parrot who did some good in his day. He was owned by a young gentleman, whose real name to this hour I have never learned. It is down as Woodroffe, and without an asterisk, in the Literary Year Book.

THE END











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